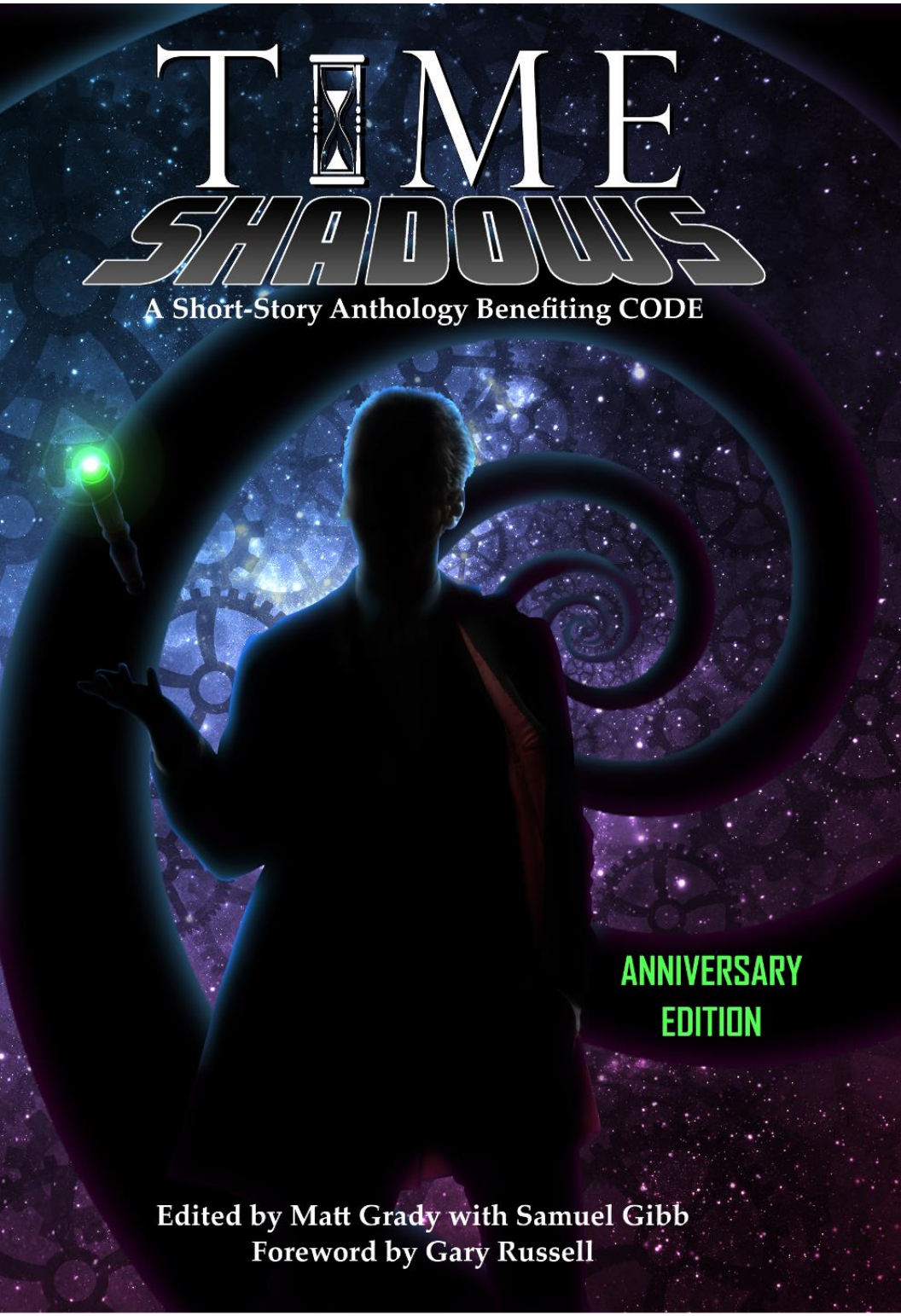
TIME
SHADOWS
A Short-Story Anthology Benefiting CODE
ANNIVERSARY
EDITION
Edited by Matt Grady with Samuel Gibb
Foreword by Gary Russell

Title Page

ANNIVERSARY EDITION
A Short-Story Anthology Benefiting **CODE**

Edited by Matt Grady with Samuel Gibb
Foreword by Gary Russell

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Colophon

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Foreword

Doctor Who fans have always been generous to charities, no matter what they are. We are, by nature it seems, incredibly pro helping out people who are, through whatever circumstances, not terribly well off.

This collection is no different – although the charity is one I haven't seen anyone dedicate a project to. CODE's work is very essential, and I'm proud to be doing my small, tiny bit here to help.

Doctor Who fan-produced (i.e. not official in any way) compendiums have a rich history – right back from what I believe was the first one, David J. Howe and David Wake's *Drabble Who* – one hundred stories of one hundred words for the RNIB's Talking Books library, through to more recent ones such as the various *You and Who* collections and Declan May's *Seasons of War*. And across the years, the associated charities have benefited enormously.

But for me, the one which really started the "trend" as it were was 1998's *Perfect Timing*, put together by Helen Fayle and Mark Phippen. This was an amazing collection of adventures which set out to prove that people other than those lucky enough, or talented enough (the two don't always go hand in hand) to have had *Doctor Who* novels published by either Virgin Books or BBC Books could still write good *Doctor Who* fiction. The sheer breadth of storytelling and scope of imagination, literally thinking outside the big blue box, that *Perfect Timing* offered readers was astonishing and a huge testament to the editors that they could take all of these disparate styles and stories and still make a cohesive collection. That's what any good charity anthology should offer: a step away from the norm and a chance to let people really play with the characters and situations, without taking away the very core of what *Doctor Who* is, expanding it in ways we might otherwise never see from the official fiction lines BBC Worldwide license out.

Doctor Who fandom has, I've always said, had a bent towards creators. Just as *Star Trek* inspired a generation of scientists and engineers, *Doctor Who* has created a generation of writers, artists and media creatives. And as each wave of "new adventurers" move onwards and upwards to become the pros of tomorrow, so the opening is created for a new cadre – and that's where these types of books become essential. I suspect YouTube will be the audition platform for many directors, presenters and musicians of the future. But the written word, the printed book, *that's* where new authors sharpen their claws and cut their teeth. And projects like *Time Shadows* are where you'll read them first…

Gary Russell
New South Wales
April 2016

P.S.: In flicking through my old copy of Perfect Timing, *I discovered I actually wrote a short story for it. I have absolutely no recollection of this and hadn't even realized it when I was waxing lyrical about* Perfect Timing *above. By the way, my story is pretty awful. Very unrepresentative of the stories that*

surrounded it. Nimons and Macra, together… I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry… at least this time around you're spared that in Time Shadows…

Introduction

I love short-story anthologies, especially *Doctor Who* ones, but there's a problem. And it's *my* problem, because I'm fussy and nitpicky, and I spend far too much time thinking about all this stuff. But when you're reading a collection of stories and you start with one about the First Doctor, and you *know* – because you looked at all those lovely titles on the contents page – that stories follow for all the other Doctors, you kind of lose the sense of jeopardy. There's no threat. No danger. At least, not to me, sometimes. And yeah, I know it's the same way the TV show works, and yes, *of course* the BBC aren't going to kill off their main character in a short story in an anthology collection. But I want to feel that they *could*. That every journey matters.

So that's how the Alpha TARDIS was born. An idea, a spark, a way to inject new memories, new adventures into the *Doctor Who* timeline – not just stories that we hadn't heard about before, but ones that hadn't *happened* before. I wanted a way to rewrite the mythology, and the most fun and unexpected way to do that seemed to be, to me, to add something *into* it. Something big. The first TARDIS. The prototype. There *must* be one. There has to be. And it's about time we heard about it, right?

And yes, I'm sure if ever the people behind the official *Doctor Who* stumble across the same daft idea that I did, they'll do it completely differently and, most importantly, *canonically*. But that's both expected and exciting. Because however they imagine it, it will be completely different to how I imagined it. And that's what happened with this story here.

I had the basic idea of the Alpha TARDIS, and a rough idea of the story that I would have written if I'd managed to find the time to write it. (Oh, if only I had a TARDIS of my own, Alpha or otherwise!) But the writers who bravely and boldly took my idea and ran with it did so brilliantly and in ways that I couldn't possibly have imagined.

They took the Alpha TARDIS and rewrote it – rewrote its history, its story and its future. That couldn't be more appropriate, could it? And I couldn't be happier with the adventure they took it on, and the adventures that the Alpha TARDIS allowed us to take our Doctors on in this book.

Samuel Gibb
April 2017

Epigraph

"Fear him not, immortal men. Time is but the shadow of the world upon the background of Eternity!"
—Jerome K. Jerome, "Clocks"

"He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

"A great man is a torch in the darkness, a beacon in superstition's night, an inspiration and a prophecy."
—Robert G. Ingersoll, "Voltaire"

A Torch in the Darkness I: The Only Warmth in a Cold Universe

by Dale Smith

"Wow," said Clara.

She had her nose to a porthole, looking out into a darkness so thick and impenetrable that all she could really see was the ghost of her own face reflected back at her. The only light in the room – the only light she could see anywhere – was the pale glow coming from the sign above the TARDIS doors. She pressed her face closer, until she could feel the cold through the inches-thick glass. Still there was absolutely nothing to see except darkness.

"Wow indeed," the Doctor agreed, looming behind her.

Nothing moved outside. Nothing could be seen. Nothing.

Clara frowned. "We are here, aren't we?"

The Doctor brushed the question aside with a gesture.

"I mean you've not just accidentally landed us at the bottom of a well have you?"

"Clara!" snapped the Doctor. His eyebrows drew together, spoiling for a fight. "That is it! A universe so ancient and bloated that even its closest points are too far apart for light to travel. It's only a matter of time before everything pulls itself so far apart that change becomes impossible."

"Change?"

"Life, Clara. You're looking out into the bleeding edge of the end of the universe."

"Wow," she said again.

She took a last, long look out into nothingness. Somewhere out there, there was still life, doing what life did: clinging on and hoping for the best. The last civilizations, spread so thin that even light didn't have enough years left to make it anywhere. Lives lived in total darkness, without warmth. Even with everything she had seen, the very idea was just too alien for her to even comprehend.

She turned to the Doctor with a grin on her face.

"Is it here?" she asked excitedly.

The Doctor waggled his eyebrows.

"Let's find out," he said.

Away from the porthole, there was a door. Through the door, there was a corridor. It snaked away in a way that made Clara's head ache. The Doctor, of course, strode down it seemingly oblivious. She reached a hand out to steady herself, and felt the walls give under her touch.

"What are these made out of?" she asked.

"I've no idea," the Doctor called back over his shoulder.

"Where does the light come from? The heat?"

“I don’t know,” he said, beaming. “Isn’t it fantastic?”

Suddenly, the Doctor pulled himself up. Standing in front of him was a short man with three eyes. The man was wearing what looked to be lizard-skin chainmail, and holding a gun that had a barrel twice as long as he was tall. The man scowled and pointed the gun directly at Clara.

“Surrender or die,” the man growled.

“Er… surrender?” Clara said. Her hands were in the air, but her eyes were on the Doctor looking for some kind of indication of the correct response. But he didn’t stop. “Doctor?”

“Come on – don’t waste time with that,” he barked, and walked straight through the man. The image didn’t even flicker.

Clara hurried to catch the Doctor up.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“That wasn’t a who.” The Doctor shuddered a little. “Don’t tell me any more. I don’t want to know how your brain interpreted that.”

“But what *was* it?”

“It was a warning, obviously. But don’t worry, it wasn’t meant for us.”

“So who was it meant for?”

The Doctor reached a pair of solid oak doors, studded with iron rivets. He threw them open without even breaking his stride, and then spun around to face Clara. His arms went up in the air, and he pulled on the manic grin of a ringmaster about to kick off the greatest show in the universe.

“This lot!” he yelled.

Clara looked. They were in an empty room, braided about with some very lacklustre velvet. There were more portholes, but outside it was still resolutely black. Clara did her best to seem impressed, but she could tell from the Doctor’s face that she had failed. He frowned at her, reaching into his pocket.

“I should’ve known,” he grumbled.

“What?” Clara said indignantly.

“We’re billions of years past anything that your primitive human brain has evolved to comprehend.”

“Less of the primitive,” Clara warned. “Which of us got ‘artichoke’ in the Times crossword?”

“‘Vervoid’ was a perfectly reasonable answer.” He pointed the sonic screwdriver at her. “Now close your eyes.”

Reluctantly, she did. Clara heard the sonic screwdriver, and then felt a painful tingle behind her eyes. She let out a cry, and her eyes opened involuntarily. Her protest died on her lips as she saw that she was suddenly in the middle of a forest of grey monoliths. All around were a multitude of odd creatures.

“Ta-da!” said the Doctor enthusiastically.

“So who are this lot?” Clara whispered.

All around, a series of indistinct blue wisps were evidently trying to placate the other creatures. Little agitated knots of colours, emotions and songs were

forming all over the forest, joined here and there by some honest to goodness people. Some of the people looked human, some looked robotic, and others looked like somebody had been throwing different bits of plants and animals together to see what stuck. What Clara did notice, though, was that almost no two creatures were the same, except the blue wisps.

"They're the guardians," the Doctor whispered back, his attention on a nearby cloud of depression. "The Knights of Refuge."

All of a sudden, the blue wisps resolved themselves into giant red squirrels, dressed in blue armour and carrying crackling glowsticks. Clara couldn't help but give a little gasp of surprise.

"What now?" the Doctor snapped.

"The guardians. They've just changed shape."

Illustration by Carolyn Edwards

"Well of course they have. You've just received information that's changed your perception of them. Now – shhhh."

The Doctor turned his attention back to the dark cloud in front of him, which Clara could see slowly resolving itself into the shape of a large black dog. It was still formless and translucent, but there was something definitely Labrador-y about it. And it was barking furiously at one of the Squirrel Knights, who was evidently trying to calm it down again. Clara listened, but she still couldn't quite make out what was being said: it was like trying to listen to a conversation at the bottom of a swimming pool. But from the look on the

Doctor's face, he could understand every word. And not one of them was making him happy.

From nowhere, the little soldier with the oversized gun started appearing all over the place. As every duplicate pronounced that they must surrender or die, Clara's inner ear popped and suddenly she could hear parts of the conversations all around her. But they soon stopped as the little soldiers pointed their guns up into the air and fired; a stream of protons left the ends of their weapons and formed a ball of glowing darkness hanging in the air. It yawned open a great dark mouth and spoke.

"Knights of Refuge," said a deep nails-down-the-chalkboard kind of a voice, "I await your response."

"You don't have to do this," one of the Squirrel Knights shouted up at the face. "We are the last—"

"No," boomed the voice. "We are the Last. We are all that is left of the great civilizations of the universe. We cannot waste time and resources preserving the lesser races. Protect the Last and you will do something more important than any of your kind has done before in all of history."

"Refuge is a place where any may come for safety," another Squirrel Knight told the voice patiently. "Even the Last. But not only."

The voice clicked its non-existent tongue in disgust.

"You do not deserve the Ember. You fail to recognize its true purpose: to warm and protect the Last. It shall be taken from you."

The black ball in the air crackled angrily. The Doctor looked back at Clara.

"How much of that did you get?" he asked.

"Good guys," she answered, pointing at the squirrels. Then she pointed to the talking black hole: "Bad guys."

"Close enough." The Doctor shrugged. "Now…" He pulled himself to his feet and swung the psychic paper around. "Who wants to show us this Ember?"

"That's it, isn't it," Clara said.

The Squirrel Knights had led them through what had seemed to Clara to be a labyrinth of *Coronation Street*-esque cobbled streets and red brick alleyways. Sometimes the bricks had morphed into snow-covered pine trees – with the snow itself seeming quite keen to give them directions – but mostly they stayed bricks. Then they turned a corner, and they had found themselves in a dry and dusty desert. It was only as they had walked into a seemingly solid wall of heat that Clara realized just how cool the rest of Refuge had been. But not here: here was intense, an oven. And the heat radiated not from the dying sun above them, but from the city ahead.

"Yes," the Doctor half-whispered. Clara could tell even he was a little awestruck. "Yes, that's it, Clara."

Just like they'd been told it would be.

It had only been a few hours ago, by their frame of reference. They'd been following some mystery or other into the forgotten underground canals of late twenty-second century Manchester, the Doctor disappearing into the gloom as Clara did her best to keep up. The canal was down to her right as she walked, and the lapping of the murky water sent strange echoes bouncing around the ancient tunnel. Then a cloaked figure wearing a raven mask stepped out of the darkness and grabbed her, and she had let out an involuntary scream that had drowned out every echo.

The Doctor was there before the last trace of it had died.

"What's all this then?"

"Stay back," the raven-man warned in a dried rasp. "I need you alive. Not her."

"For what?"

"There's something hiding at the end of the universe. I need you to collect it. If you do, then I let her go. If you don't…"

The raven-man let the threat hang, but the Doctor was already grinning.

"Really?" the Doctor asked.

"I don't—" the raven-man stumbled. "I *will* hurt her."

"No, really? This? You want to do it like this?"

Behind his mask, Clara could tell the raven-man was looking befuddled. She felt his grip tighten across her throat, and she knew she was going to have to take pity on him. For his own good.

"You're doing it wrong," Clara confided.

"What?"

"You're doing it wrong," Clara sighed, and shrugged away from the raven-man. He simply stood and let her go, probably trying to work out just when this had all gotten away from him. Clara pointed to the Doctor. "You threaten me. Send him off on some errand. Do you really think he's going to run off like a good little boy and do it? He'll have me safe and you blowing up your own homeworld before twenty minutes are out."

"But—"

"No, she's right," the Doctor interrupted. "That's not the way."

"So…" The raven-man stopped. He lifted his mask a little to rub the sweat from his forehead. His voice was developing a whiney quality. "So what's the right way?"

"Ah!" the Doctor clapped his hands together. "Tell him the right way."

Clara smiled.

"Tell him about the something," she said. "Right at the end of the universe? Got to be a pretty special something. How's he going to resist going and taking a look at a special something like that?"

And so the raven-man told them about the Alpha.

It wasn't a particularly big city, as cities go. More St. David's than Manchester. It caught the light like it was made of fine bone china, or else possibly just bone. There were turrets and spires jostling for roof space with strange looking

antennae and probes, and around its border was a crumbling brick wall that must have been a good two metres thick and twice as tall. Clara had gone wandering deep into the heart of the TARDIS once, and had seen similar looking bricks there. Blood red and warm to the touch.

"What does it look like to you?" Clara asked.

"The same as it does to you," the Doctor told her. "It isn't like anything else here, Clara. It's beyond interpretation."

"Really?"

A ghost of a smile appeared on the Doctor's lips.

"Don't worry," he told her. "If the legends are right, it's smaller on the inside."

"Is it safe?"

"Safe? Definitely not. It's so steeped in time energy that its half-life is longer than the span of all history. It's the only warmth left in this cold universe. No wonder the Last are so keen to get their hands on it."

"But we're going to stop them," Clara said. The Doctor didn't respond. "Right?"

The Doctor stared out at the burning city.

"You want to fly it, don't you," Clara realized.

"It's older than anything I've ever seen," the Doctor said in that faraway voice. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Wilder. No restrictions, no limits. No safety nets. It's the blueprint for every TARDIS, the first the Time Lords ever made. It's the Alpha."

"Yeah, you want to fly it."

"I do," he agreed. "But first – let's see about the Last, shall we?"

"We cannot defeat the Last," the squirrels had told them. "They are too many, and we are too few. But it is our moral duty to do all that we can to protect those that have come here seeking safety. Even if it means that we all perish. In the end, we always knew it would happen."

"You're looking at it the wrong way," the Doctor had told them.

It didn't take long for the Last to gain entry to Refuge. After all, its central tenet was that all were welcome, and the idea that anyone would want to spend the universe's last years waging war had never occurred to its Knights. Another reason why an alliance could not be forged: they couldn't see that now everything mattered much more, not much less. Even if the Knights hadn't been diluting the blood and history of the universe's significant races, the Last would have been obligated to destroy them because they had already given up everything that mattered.

Their leader followed his front line into Refuge. He had expected some kind of resistance, but as yet… he felt a sudden wave of ennui as a conceptual weapon picked him out, but the nodes on his red armour absorbed the worst of it. He spun to see a knot of armoured Knights charging towards them; he froze

the scene for a moment and counted each of them, and realized that there were none unaccounted for. So, a last ditch charge for death or glory. At least it would be over quickly.

The leader unfroze the scene, and his men picked up his intention. They returned fire, but the Knights' nerve had apparently already failed them; the group splintered into factions and retreated into the shadows. The leader tutted: to think this was the best the lesser races had to offer. The universe was probably ending out of embarrassment. He intended for his troops to divide; the majority gave chase to mop up the Knights, whilst the remainder fell in behind him.

He felt for the Ember, and his skin blistered at its touch.

He and his men set off to uncover it.

It would not take long.

"Look around you. These are the last men, women and children of a thousand different races, all gathered here, now," the Doctor had told them. "Fleeing the destruction of your own worlds, your own lives. Fleeing here. Look around. You – you're a Gween, yes? And there – a Zenith. And is that a Notiovore I can feel nibbling away at my pride? I think it is."

"Notiovore?" Clara had whispered.

"Conceptual being," the Doctor had explained. "Feeds on the ideas in other people's heads. I found one stuck in a journalist on Fleet Street once; it had eaten every idea in his head just to survive. They made him editor-in-chief in the end."

The Last came to a ravine separating two aspects of Refuge. The leader could feel the Ember on the other side, drawing him on. The gap wasn't wide, and the Last could stride across without much difficulty. Which was what made it all the more annoying that one of his men stepped out without looking and suddenly plunged downwards. It was as if he had no idea at all about how gravity worked. Good riddance. They would waste no time mourning the idiot.

The Last pushed on.

"And you!" the Doctor had said. "Kroatoa, yes? Skin like a diamond-plated tank. There's nothing left in the universe that could get through it."

Out of nowhere, a giant with glistening skin had leapt and grabbed one of the Last, curling him round into an awkward embrace. Barely an inch of the enfolded Last could be seen, although they could all feel his annoyance at being held. The giant didn't move, not even when the leader intended that its back be cut open to allow the soldier to climb out again. Everything the Last threw at the giant's glistening skin glanced off without leaving a mark, and eventually the

leader was forced to leave two men behind to keep trying while the rest of them pressed on for the Ember.

"What about you? Yes, we know each other. Or will: when you live your life backward, you'll just have to learn to take my word on that. But that means you're the only one who knows how all of this ends up, aren't you?"

The remaining Last caught sight of a shadowy figure as it crossed over into the desert. It didn't seem to be carrying weapons and should have been an easy kill. Yet it avoided every blast as if it already knew where they would fall. The leader sent two more men after the figure, just to be on the safe side.

"A Pyrokeet—"

A Last was trapped in a cage of living fire.

"A Frigian—"

Another in a cage of solid ice.

The Doctor had looked at the Knights, fixed each of them with a piercing gaze.

"You think these people are your duty? Your burden? Well let me tell you: they're not. You didn't bring them here so you could protect them. This is their home now just as much as it is yours. And together, you can defend it."

As he stood at the wall that separated the desert from the Ember, the leader barely even noticed that he was the last of the Last. He could feel the heat from the city pressing back at him. It was almost impossible to raise his hand to run it down the rough brickwork, but somehow he found the strength.

He reached for the gate that he had found.

"You separate the leader from his men," the Doctor had said. "Then leave him to me."

The leader couldn't open the gate. Even if he'd had a chance before, the Doctor had reached an understanding with the central operating system. The leader

could stand out there knocking, screaming and demanding until the end of the universe, and the doors would not open. But that wouldn't help anybody, so the Doctor gave the "doors open" command – a whistled approximation of the opening bars of "Back in Black" – and stared down at the surprised leader.

"Come with me," the Doctor said.

When the Alpha TARDIS took off, it shook the universe. The control room was a small chamber at the heart of the city, with a central column and room for roughly six to stand in. The rest of the city was the engines, great beasts that even the Doctor could only half perceive. As they stirred into life from their half-dead slumber, the angry complaints of the laws of cause and effect filled the air. Everything pulsed with the double-beat of the engines' hearts as they dragged the city through space and time.

"I don't know where you think you can take me that will make any difference," the leader said.

The Doctor said nothing, dancing from control to control whistling "Albatross".

"You would not be the first time traveller to attempt to discredit the Last by uncovering our race's secrets," the leader continued, warily. "We have none. Our past is brutal and cruel. But it serves to demonstrate how far we have come. You will change nothing by showing it to me."

Still the Doctor ignored him.

"DO NOT IGNORE—" the leader yelled.

The lights in the control room flashed brighter, and the leader had to cover his eyes to protect them. When he looked again, the lighting had returned to normal. The Doctor was glaring at him, holding a finger to his lips.

"Shh," the Doctor said. "We're not going so far. Just a few years."

"I am not worried," the leader replied, flatly.

"Of course not. You're the last of the great races."

"Mock all you wish."

"Thank you. I will."

"It will not change the facts. We have to prioritize. We have to be practical. Millions of years of culture and science cannot be allowed to disappear because creatures like you are unwilling to make difficult choices."

The Doctor smiled thinly.

"Ah yes," he said, flicking a switch. "About that."

One of the walls of the room crumbled to dust, and left the room open to the vacuum outside. But the vacuum was not calm and quiet – it boiled with savage fire and anger. It raged like a storm, tossing the ship this way and that on some unknown whim. The engines howled as they fought to keep the ship flying on the edge of something that was slowly tearing itself apart. Somewhere, a bell began to toll.

"What is this?" the leader said. There was panic now in his voice.

"I told you," the Doctor shouted over the turmoil. "Only a few years. A few years forward. The universe is getting a bit frayed at the edges, don't you think? It's expanded too far, too fast. It's starting to tear itself apart."

The leader stared out into the destruction, eyes wide with terror.

"Where are your million years of culture now?" the Doctor hissed in his ear.

The leader just stared.

The Doctor stood in the desert and watched as the leader handed himself over to the Knights of Refuge. Nobody looked at him, and nobody asked what had been said to make the Last surrender. Behind him, the city stood, still radiating the heat of the universe's last moments.

"So that's it?" asked Clara, appearing behind him. "You tell him it's all pointless? That the universe ends and everything is gone forever?"

The Doctor pulled his hands from his pockets.

"That's summarizing a little…"

Clara grinned impishly.

"And you're not going to tell him what happens *after* that?" she asked.

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak, but instead a cry came out. He didn't see Clara's face crease with concern, or hear her shout his name. The searing pain had dropped him to his knees, his hands clutching at his head as they tried to hold it together. His mind burned and stretched, filled past capacity with a flood of data: an animatronic captain swiping at him with his hooked hand; a Dalek, free of its casing, surrounded by toy soldiers; zombies! Expanding too far, too fast, his mind started to tear itself apart.

"Memories!" he hissed through gritted teeth.

"What should I do?" Clara asked desperately.

"Too many. Old, and new. Mine but not mine." The Doctor spat each word out. The pain would not subside. "All the things I never… They're… they're…"

"They're what?"

"*A distraction!*" he yelled.

And the air filled with the sound of ancient engines grinding into life once more. The wind whipped the desert into a sea of sand and storms. But it was the heat they felt first, or rather its absence. As the Alpha TARDIS slipped away from Refuge, so too did the heat it gave. Clara turned just in time to see the city fade, and then the sand covered everything.

When she looked again, the Alpha TARDIS was gone.

Next Episode
A LEGENDARY HERO

Time's Shadow

by Simon Blake

Out of the fog of a cold November night came the imposing figure of a London policeman. Pausing a moment, he shone his torch across a pair of old gates.

I.M.FOREMAN
Scrap Merchant
76, TOTTER'S LANE

Noticing one of the gates wasn't quite closed, he gave it a push. Slowly it swung open to reveal an odd assortment of bric-a-brac. Old bicycles and furniture, mannequins and battered car parts all crammed into the little yard. However, most incongruous to the officer was the tall, blue shape of a police telephone box.

Why on earth should that be there? Surely the old scrap merchant hadn't stolen it?

There was something else disquieting about the Police Box. It appeared to be emitting a faint hum. As he watched, the light on top began to flash, and a strange wheezing, groaning sound echoed around the yard. Then to the officer's complete surprise, a second identical Police Box began to appear opposite the first. For a moment it seemed to fade in and out, pulling itself out of nowhere. Simultaneously, the original box began to grow faint. Colour and detail became indistinct as if its entire substance was being drawn away from its shape.

In mere moments, the second Police Box had materialized fully, whilst the original had faded to nothing more than its outline. The officer blinked. He could hardly focus on it. The empty space at its centre pulsed with an inner blue light, a precisely framed absence, crackling with an alien energy.

In sheer amazement, the officer found himself approaching the object. What sort of trick was this? Reaching out, he touched it. It crackled uncomfortably against his skin. Instinctively, he tried to draw his hand away, but found he could not. In a sudden jerk of panic, he pulled harder. A burning sensation crawled across his skin, and to his horror, he saw that his hand was beginning to pulse. The same blue energy was coursing through his touch, emptying his fingers of any substance. The burning was excruciating. His entire arm, his torso, even his face was being consumed. He tried to scream but too soon the officer had been filleted. Nothing remained but his silhouette, a gross parody of a man, helmet to boots.

Finally released, the empty shape raised its hands as if to examine itself, and then regarded the glowing box. The pulsing was now resonant in each. Throwing back its head, the figure then gave a shrill, inhuman cry. It was as if the howling desolation of its centre needed some release. A sudden burst of movement, the figure sank to all fours and bolted for the gates. The shape of a man but with the movements of a wild animal, it moved to lose itself in the dark and the fog of the streets.

Inside the second Police Box, things were beginning to settle as Ian Chesterton opened his eyes. Gazing around the gleaming white control room of the TARDIS, he saw his fellow companions beginning to pick themselves up off the floor.

"Is everyone all right?"

Barbara and Susan answered that they were, and the Doctor grumbled indignantly.

Pulling himself up, Ian then slumped onto a nearby Chippendale, one of the Doctor's incongruous antiques that cluttered the control room.

"What happened, Doctor? Did we hit something?"

"No, no, no, my boy, I don't think it was anything external." The Doctor was already on his feet. Adjusting levers and throwing switches, he moved around the central control console with the agility of a much younger man. "Come along, come along. Let's see where we've landed, hmm?"

Susan immediately sprang to her grandfather's side. Together they worked through their landing checks whilst Ian went to help Barbara.

"It's all right, I can manage," she insisted.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Ian. Perhaps this was one bumpy landing too many for her.

"Ian, do you think he's done it this time? Do you think he's got us home?"

"I don't know." He didn't want to cloud Barbara's hopes. After two trips into danger, the Doctor had maintained that he was at least trying to get them home. The TARDIS most certainly was a marvel, but Ian was beginning to have serious doubts about the Doctor's ability to control it.

As if to prove the point, the Doctor was muttering over the controls. "I don't know, I don't know. It makes no sense, no sense at all."

"The coordinates aren't matching up, Grandfather," chimed Susan.

"Well, Doctor, are we home?"

"Oh, don't ask such tiresome questions, Chesterton. The readings say that we're still traveling through time but see for yourself, hmm? We've clearly landed." He indicated towards the large glass column at the centre of the control console. It was now still, meaning the ship was at rest.

"But are we home, Doctor?" pleaded Barbara.

"Well, I… er… I had hoped to use the Fast Return Switch to get you back to your own time, but…"

The Doctor appeared hesitant, and Barbara seized the point.

"Fast Return Switch?"

"Yes," confirmed Susan, brightly. "It simply takes the data from the TARDIS's previous journeys and works out the quickest route to our last location."

Barbara was astounded. "You mean you could have used that all along?"

"Young lady, it's not that simple," protested the Doctor.

"Is this another one of your tricks? Another faulty component so that you get your own way?"

"How dare you."

"Barbara, take it easy." Ian squeezed her arm. He had never seen her like this. She seemed to be reaching her limits with the Doctor.

"Take it easy? Don't you see, Ian? He has no intention of ever letting the three of us go."

"No, that simply isn't true." Susan leapt to her grandfather's defence, but Ian was curious.

"The three of us?"

"Oh, you know what I mean," muttered Barbara evasively.

Ian nodded, but then noticed Susan's nervous expression.

"Well, Doctor," he said, trying to establish a calmer tone, "Barbara does have a point. Why couldn't you have used this Fast Return Switch?"

"I don't see why I should answer any questions if I am to be subject to this abuse."

"But there *is* an answer?"

"Of course," confirmed the Doctor haughtily, but then appeared a little abashed. "I er… I'm afraid that's my fault again. You see, when I first took you with me—"

"Kidnapped us, you mean?"

"Miss Wright, I am trying to be honest with you," sighed the Doctor.

"Please, let him finish."

"Thank you, Susan. Now I'm afraid our first journey was made a little too hurriedly to record. The TARDIS simply had no data with which to programme a return journey. Of course, I've tried to work out our position since, but my calculations could only be so precise."

"In short, we could be anywhere," chided Barbara.

"I'm afraid so. We'll have to use the scanner. Susan?" At the Doctor's indication, Susan activated the screen.

Immediately Barbara gave a scream. "What is it?"

The scanner had opened onto what appeared to be the remnants of a human face, half-smashed away in the darkness.

"Wait a moment, I know that," insisted Susan. "It's one of the mannequins from the junkyard."

Barbara could hardly believe what she was hearing. "The junkyard? You mean we're home?"

Ian clasped her hands in delight. "Barbara, he did it." Then noticing the tears running down her cheek: "Hey, come on, it's over now." He used his handkerchief to gently dab her cheeks.

She reached warmly for his hand. "I know. Oh, Ian, I didn't think he would ever…"

She then trailed off as she noticed Susan rushing to the Doctor's side. Suddenly he appeared on the verge of collapsing.

"Grandfather!"

"I'm all right, child, I… it's just a headache." Then straightening up, the Doctor blinked. "Extraordinary… it seems to have passed."

It only lasted a moment, and Ian knew better than to ask the old man if he was all right. “Have you worked out *when* we are, Doctor?”

“All in good time, young man. All in good time. Ah! Perhaps this is the reason for the confusion in my instruments. We appear to be back in your time, Chesterfield: November twenty-third, nineteen sixty-three, but look at the time. See? It keeps changing.”

“But what does that mean, Doctor?” asked Ian.

“It means that time is in flux. That explains why the TARDIS still thinks we’re moving – and possibly my headache…” The Doctor dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. “The TARDIS isn’t moving through time. Time appears to be moving around the TARDIS. Ah, yes, that’s it. I must have a mild case of time-sickness, hmm?”

“A simple answer, please,” insisted Barbara. “Is this our time or isn’t it?”

“No.”

“But you just said—”

“It is not your time *yet*,” said the Doctor portentously. “As far as I can tell we have arrived less than an hour before our original departure.”

“Well, what’s an hour here or there?” Ian grinned.

“It’s no laughing matter, young man. Don’t you realize the dangers of arriving before you leave? If you were to run into yourselves out there, the results could be catastrophic. You might prevent our original departure, and then the whole pattern of events would change.”

“Oh I see,” agreed Ian. “You mean we’d affect our own past?”

“Precisely, we’d be trapped in a paradox.”

“More excuses. Why can’t you just let us take our chances?”

“No, Barbara,” cautioned Ian. “I think he’s right this time. It could be extremely dangerous.”

“Indeed,” agreed the Doctor, eagerly retrieving his hat and cloak from a large brass lectern. “Now, I think the best thing for you to do is to stay here whilst I have a quick scout around outside; see if we can’t unravel this mystery, hmm?”

“Just a minute,” demanded Barbara. “If it’s not safe for us, then it must be just as dangerous for you. There’s another you out there too, remember?”

“Ah!” exclaimed the Doctor. “That’s where you’re wrong, Miss Wright. You see, Susan and I exist in a special relationship to time. We can’t be out there now when we’re in here with you. You see?”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh, Barbara, Barbara, Barbara.” The old man beamed, taking her hand. “If you were to leave this room now, and then after a moment walk back in again, you wouldn’t expect to find yourself still there, now would you, hmm?”

“Well, no but—”

“Precisely. Well that takes care of that.” He patted her hand and gave her a sly chuckle. Operating a control, he then threw a long, striped scarf around his neck as the TARDIS doors swung slowly open behind him.

"And remember," he announced, "do not try to follow me. It may be extremely dangerous." And with another little chuckle, he departed into the dark London fog.

Barbara turned to Ian in exasperation, but he could only grin.

Exiting the TARDIS, the Doctor pulled the doors closed behind him. Immediately he felt the strain on his lungs and armed himself with his handkerchief. Most definitely the middle of the twentieth century, he mused. Nowhere had smog quite like London. Waving away the miasma, he coughed and patted his chest. Then he noticed what appeared to be an almost perfect crystalline rendering of the TARDIS. The outline was precise, but any inner detail was entirely lost to a pulsing blue light emanating from its centre.

"Extraordinary," muttered the Doctor, as he felt the sudden flush of his headache returning. "Yes, this must be it: the source of the time fluctuation – and my headache, hmm?"

Careful not to touch it, he made a complete circuit of the object.

"Yes, quite extraordinary," he repeated to no one in particular. "And in exactly the same spot from which we last dematerialized."

Despite the brightness of the object, its iridescence seemed confined entirely to its own shape. It cast neither beam nor shadow, leaving the junkyard as dark and hazardous as ever.

He chuckled. "That's it, an absence. Yes, a hole in the fabric of space and time. I must find out its range of influence." With that he produced a match from his pocket and held the tip against the glowing object. Spontaneously, it struck up a flame of its own accord.

"Residual energy," muttered the Doctor, regarding the flame. Then making for the gates of the little junkyard, he opened them to the thick fog.

Suddenly, a fierce scream cut through the air. The Doctor stopped dead. The sound was like that of an animal in pain, but carried with it an echoing, metallic quality. Then at the other end of the street, the Doctor caught his first glimpse of the creature. It pulsed with the same bright blue energy as the crystalline Police Box. Appearing and disappearing from view, it staggered and charged back and forth among the parked cars. Its shape may have been humanoid, but its movements were anything but human. At times it moved as if wounded, perhaps even blinded. Then it would suddenly lunge forward as if having caught the scent of some prey. With unnerving clarity, the Doctor noticed that each lunge brought the creature closer to his hiding place.

Immediately, the Doctor blew out his match and ducked down behind a battered old Volkswagen. Things were worse than he'd thought. Having one source of unstable energy was bad enough, but to find another stalking the streets of London was quite a different matter. Making a mental note never to cross its path, the Doctor took another quick glance at the apparition. If he moved now it would surely see him. He would bide his time and make a break for the TARDIS once the coast was clear.

Alone in the TARDIS control room, Ian had been watching the Doctor's progress on the scanner. Just as the junkyard gates closed behind the old man, Ian had caught sight of the creature. It had shone out from the fog with an unsettling radiance, like a window into daylight. No more than a glimpse, but in the absurdity of the moment, Ian might even have credited it with the shape of a policeman.

"Where's he gone now?" said Barbara.

Startled from the screen, Ian turned to see Barbara entering from the living quarters.

"I don't know," he answered. There was no sense in worrying her until the Doctor reported back. "Don't you think you were a little hard on him just now?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I was. It's just we're so close, Ian."

"I'm just as eager as you, but let's not antagonize him. I'm sure he's doing his best."

"Is he?" Barbara seemed lost in consideration. "Ian, did you really believe what he said – about us having arrived an hour before we left?"

Ian shrugged. "It's possible, I suppose. But if it is true, then I think the dangers he mentioned are real. Why?"

"Well, just suppose he isn't being totally honest with us?"

"Well, why would he lie?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps he suspects something."

"Suspects what? Barbara, you're not making any sense."

Barbara had been pacing, but now she stopped and turned on him.

"Ian, we're leaving," she announced solemnly. "Both of us."

"Both?" Then it was that Ian noticed Susan standing at the door. Her expression was serious, and for a moment Ian thought the girl might be ill. She was carrying a large holdall, and suddenly it all made perfect sense to Ian. "Susan, you too?"

She nodded but seemed indecisive, nervous even. "That's right. I'm going to live with Barbara."

"You can't mean it," stammered Ian.

"And why not?" demanded Barbara.

"Well, have you thought about what the Doctor might say?"

"No, I haven't."

Ian gave her a long look. "You're not going to wait for him to return?"

"No," replied Barbara, her tone adamant. "We have to go now. Don't you see, Ian? This is our best opportunity."

Ian nodded to himself. "I was wondering why Susan was suddenly wearing her school dress."

Susan looked abashed and her eyes fell. She seemed prepared to let her former teacher do the talking for them both.

"We were going to just slip out when the Doctor was busy, but now he's given us time to pack. We'll make for my mother's house. She lives in Shoreditch."

Ian could contain himself no longer: “But Barbara, you can’t just leave like this. It’s not safe.”

“It’s never been safe, Ian. Not since we stepped aboard this wretched machine. We can’t trust that man not to get us all killed – and I can’t take anymore.”

Ian sighed. In all conscience, he should have realized how far Barbara had been pushed by their adventures.

“And you, Susan. Can you really leave your grandfather?”

Steeling herself, the young girl looked up. “I told him I loved the Earth, the twentieth century… Barbara says she can give me a proper home.”

“But it’ll destroy him.”

“No,” protested Susan. “He knows I have to grow up sometime. He’ll understand.”

Ian was doubtful. “Will he?” Turning back to Barbara: “And what about all we’ve been through together? If the Doctor sees you plotting against him now, it’ll completely undermine the trust we’ve built—”

“Trust?” Barbara exploded. “How can you call it that? After everything we’ve seen. Savages, mutations, *the Dalek*s!” She was on the verge of tears, but she did not shy from Ian’s gaze. “And throughout this entire ordeal, the most uncertain thing of all has always been the Doctor.”

“No,” protested Susan, “that simply isn’t true. Grandfather just can’t help getting involved, that’s all.”

Barbara’s gaze was unflinching. “Come with us, Ian. Don’t you want to see your home again? You could be back in Piccadilly in half an hour… Please, Ian. Think about it.”

“No.”

“Very well.” Barbara was determined. “Then Susan and I will have to go alone.”

“I said no because I think the Doctor’s right. There could be danger here.” Ian hesitated, wondering whether Barbara was ready to hear. “There’s something out there. Some sort of creature. It could be alien – and I don’t think it’s very friendly.”

Susan’s reaction was instant: “No, but Grandfather’s still out there.” In a panic, she flew to the controls, trying to increase the range on the scanner. “I must see.”

Ian turned back to Barbara. “You see?” he muttered softly. “You can’t take Susan with you. She belongs here with her grandfather.”

“You’re lying…” Barbara whispered, incredulous. It was as if she had finally given in to her deepest suspicions. “You don’t want us to leave either. Why are you suddenly on *his* side?”

“Barbara, you’re being—” What? Paranoid, hysterical? He had no idea what to say. He wanted to protest, but he couldn’t blame her. Finally in sight of home, she could no longer contain her desperation.

Fortunately for Ian, he was spared a difficult response by the opening of the TARDIS doors. Everyone turned to see as the Doctor walked back in, apparently bright and cheerful.

“Grandfather!” Susan ran to embrace him.

Instantly Barbara froze, avoiding Ian’s eye.

“What’s this?” chuckled the Doctor. “I’m perfectly well, child. I was only gone a few moments.”

“But the thing outside,” began Susan. “The creature…”

“Eh? What? What’re you talking about?” he muttered evasively.

“I saw it on the scanner, Doctor,” confessed Ian.

The Doctor looked as though he might try to deny the apparition but then nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid it appears my suspicions were correct. We have indeed arrived before our original selves departed.” Then jabbing a finger at Ian: “Your vehicle, it wouldn’t happen to be a dilapidated old heap parked outside my gates, now would it, hmm?”

“My car,” exclaimed Ian in delight. “It’s still there?”

“That is what I said,” snapped the Doctor, “but I’m afraid I have some rather distressing news. Now tell me, what were your exact movements before you entered my ship?”

“We were outside for about half-an-hour, waiting for Susan. We wanted to see where she lived.”

“Sitting in your car?” persisted the Doctor.

“Yes,” answered Ian, “but then you’d already guessed that, hadn’t you?”

The Doctor and Ian exchanged a significant look.

“What on Earth are you two talking about?” demanded Barbara.

Ian turned to her. “Don’t you see? If we’ve gone back in time to before we left, then you and I should still be out there sitting in my car.”

“Yes, of course, but—”

“Well, Doctor? I’m guessing you’re going to tell us we’re not there now.”

The old man nodded, his face grave.

Barbara looked from Ian to the Doctor. “But how can that be?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” replied the Doctor, tapping his chin, “but you’ve all seen that glowing box on the scanner, hmm? I believe that is in fact our past selves before we departed… That is what remains of the TARDIS.”

“But it can’t be,” objected Susan.

“I’m afraid so. It seems something has knocked the TARDIS completely out of this dimension.”

“Leaving only a hole in time and space…” mused Ian.

“Precisely,” confirmed the Doctor. “And if we are to stand any chance of solving this mystery, then I’m going to need exact calculations. Susan, I want you to disconnect the TARDIS drive systems. Chesterford, you my dear boy can help me lift some equipment. Oh, and Miss Wright, you can help too. I need—”

“Oh, Barbara’s not feeling very well, Doctor,” interrupted Ian. “She was just going for a lie down.” He shot Barbara a meaningful glance, earning himself a reproachful glare in return.

“Oh my dear,” chimed the Doctor, warmly clasping her hands, “I am sorry to hear that. You go rest. I’m sure between the three of us we can manage.”

Ian offered her a smile, but Barbara’s expression remained fixed as she quietly left the control room.

"What are we going to do, Grandfather?"

"We're going to build a Time Vector Stabilizer," declared the Doctor, his eyes beaming with delight.

Susan had been working on extracting a component from the central control console. The normally six-sided unit now stood in disarray, with one section removed. In its place, a series of thick cables ran out through the double doors of the TARDIS. Releasing the intricate piece of circuitry, Susan followed the power lines outside.

In the junkyard, she found the Doctor busily working on the sixth side of the console. Ian, meanwhile, stood by waiting to lend a hand. The customary gloom of the yard was now bathed in light from the TARDIS. It spilled from the open doors and the high lattice windows. Even the light on top rotated its beam upon proceedings.

"I have the comparator you wanted, Grandfather."

"Ah, yes," confirmed the Doctor, taking the component from her. "Now we add this to the dimensional stabilizer." He knelt down and peered into the workings of the dismantled portion of console.

Ian shook his head in wonder. "Dimensional stabilizer?"

"Yes," confirmed Susan, "I think it helps maintain the inner dimensions of the TARDIS."

That struck a note with Ian. "You *think?* But didn't you say that you made up the name *TARDIS*, Susan?"

"That's right," agreed the girl brightly.

"Then would you mind explaining how neither of you seem to know very much about this ship you've named?"

The Doctor gave a cough of mock affront and disappeared back into the workings of his machine. "Don't know my own ship? How dare you… mmfffmffm!"

Susan giggled and handed Ian a replacement component to hold. "I only named the ship because there was no Earth word for 'TARDIS' in the translation matrix. You see, no TARDIS had ever visited Earth before. So I made up the name and reprogrammed the circuits, else – well – you never would have understood the equivalent in our language."

"*Your* language?" Ian laughed, only half-believing her story. "I don't know. It's all beyond me."

"Well, perhaps this is more in your line, hmm?" The Doctor held out his code book and a pencil to Ian. "Now, I want you to take down all the readings on that dial there. We're about to start testing."

"All right, but I still don't know what you hope to achieve."

"It's a matter of time distortion, Chessington. Time is being pulled out of shape around that object there." The Doctor pointed to the Police Box-shaped hole, where it remained gently pulsing at the other end of the yard. The sight was disconcerting, and Ian found he had to look away.

"We're trying to stabilize this portion of space-time. Then, if we're lucky, I might be able to close the breach, hmm? Before we create some rather nasty dimensional anomalies. We're balanced enough for the time being, but there are dangers…" Suddenly he appeared deeply unsettled, and Susan moved in a little closer.

"You will be safe, won't you, Grandfather?"

"Hmm? Oh, of course, my dear. Of course." The old man gently squeezed her shoulders, yet his expression remained serious. "No, what concerns me more is if my little experiment gives away our position."

Startled, Susan looked up at her grandfather. "You mean *they* might find us?"

The old man's countenance was graver than Ian had ever seen.

"No, no, I'm sure they can't," asserted the Doctor. "For some reason this time period is too complex for their detectors… That's why I brought us here in the first place."

Ian had no idea who the Doctor and Susan could be talking about, but the subject obviously caused them the greatest concern.

"Now, I'm going to need you both to hold onto the console," instructed the Doctor. "It may shake a little as the power starts to build."

With that, both Ian and Susan secured themselves around the machine the Doctor had built. Simultaneously, behind them the engines of the TARDIS began to hum a steady tone.

"Ah, there you see? It works," exclaimed the Doctor, delightedly. "That proves that this fissure is a direct result of our original departure. All right, I think that's enough of a power build-up… Now, Susan," bellowed the Doctor.

Immediately Susan threw the final switch, and the pitch of the Doctor's machine deepened.

Across from the TARDIS, the glowing of the absent Police Box was beginning to intensify. Then an odd semblance of shapes began to arrange themselves within its outline, items of scrap visible through a transparency of colour. The hole was beginning to close.

"It's working, Grandfather. It's working."

The Doctor clasped his hands together with delight. "I've done it, I've done it," he exclaimed. "Now we can simply leave the reaction to catalyze while we await the readings."

Barbara had been pacing the living quarters, furious with Ian for dismissing her like that. It was obvious he thought she just needed a little time to calm down. Storming back into the control room, she was surprised to find it empty. Then following the cables outside, she took her first step into the cool night air. Instantly, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck awaken. Hugging her arms across her chest, she sniffed. Undeniably London – she was home at long last.

Across the yard, the Doctor switched off his machine and silence fell once more. For a moment he stood solemnly over the controls, the readings at his fingertips.

"There we have it then. Now we know." His face was lined and grave. "We are trying to meddle with a fixed point in time."

"Have you worked out what happened, Doctor?" asked Ian.

"Yes, my boy. I'm rather afraid I have. You see it's all my fault. I should never have tried to materialize so near to our original point of departure. Susan and I would have managed alone, of course. We cannot normally cross our own timestreams, but this is the first time I've attempted the journey with aliens on board."

"Aliens?" Barbara balked at the word.

"Ah, my dear Barbara," greeted the Doctor. "I do hope you're feeling a little better."

Barbara could only offer a weak smile, before shooting a warning glance at Ian.

"You said aliens?"

"Quite so," confirmed the Doctor. "You see, the ship wasn't prepared to risk you both running into yourselves, so to speak. So it initiated its emergency protocol."

"Which means?" asked Ian.

"Well, you might say we sidestepped. At the moment of landing, the TARDIS opened up a sort of pocket universe, you see? This is nothing but a discrete moment of alternative time."

"Hold on." Ian was trying his best to follow the Doctor's explanation. "You mean to say this isn't even our universe?"

"Precisely, no. The TARDIS generated a stable safe zone in a dimension defined by our arrival."

"But everything's exactly the same," countered Barbara. "You can see that it is."

"Except that we have displaced our original selves."

"But where to, Doctor?"

"Oh, here and there, my boy, here and there. Fluxing between the two states of being."

Ian was shocked. "You mean we're like *Schrödinger's cat?* We're both here and *not here* at the same time?"

"Precisely, my dear boy, precisely." The Doctor beamed, as if delighted by a sudden hint of promise from a particularly dull pupil.

"So that Police Box shape—?"

The Doctor nodded. "Is the shadow of our former selves about to begin our original journey."

Barbara turned away. She had had enough of these nonsensical explanations. Just beyond those battered little gates lay her home, her life, exactly as she had left it. She glanced over at Susan. The girl was now busy with a plastic label maker. Having just printed out a strip of words, she was sticking it onto the disconnected portion of the control console.

"Susan, can I have a word please?"

The girl looked nervous but nodded towards the open door of the TARDIS. "All right."

“I’m sorry,” said Susan anxiously, as Barbara followed her into the ship. “I just wanted to leave a few reminders for Grandfather. He knows all of the controls, of course. It’s just he’s so forgetful, and I’d hate to think of him electrocuting himself when I’m not…”

Barbara searched the girl’s mournful expression. “Susan, I think if we’re going to go, then it has to be now.”

“Silly of me, I’ve missed a switch” – she met Barbra’s gaze with tearful eyes – “and I’ve run out of tape.”

“Susan, are you listening to me?”

The girl put down her label-maker and produced a black marker pen from her pocket. “Yes, I’m listening,” she replied carelessly.

“Well, then where’s your bag?”

Susan did not immediately respond. She was carefully writing the words “Fast Return” above one of the switches on the console. “Barbara, please. I think I’ve changed my mind. I can’t leave Grandfather alone. He needs me.”

Barbara might have said more, but for Susan’s expression. Her weight of despondency was clear. The former pupil could no longer meet her teacher’s gaze. Barbara gave a long sigh and then shook her head. Ian was right: the girl belonged with the Doctor.

“Oh, Susan. But will you be safe?”

But Susan wasn’t listening. “Grandfather…”

Barbara spun round to be confronted by the Doctor, his face a picture of fury.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Well, now you know,” said Barbara, awkwardly. “I’ve decided to leave.”

“Oh, have you, indeed?” responded the Doctor indelicately. Then swinging round, he turned on Ian, who had just followed him in. “And I suppose you knew all about this, hmm?”

“Yes,” admitted Ian, “but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I see,” stormed the Doctor. “So you’re both trying to turn Susan against me. Is that it?”

Both Ian and Susan made to protest, but Barbara cut in first.

“Against you?” She was astounded.

“Yes, against me and our travels together in the TARDIS.”

Barbara almost laughed. “Has it never occurred to you that she might not want this life of constant danger, of never settling anywhere? You’re not giving her any time to grow up.”

“How dare you,” bellowed the Doctor. “She has all the time in the universe.”

“Yes,” agreed Barbara, “and yet you still can’t guarantee her a future.”

In that moment, the Doctor looked as though he might protest further, but then suddenly stumbled forward, grasping his head in pain. Immediately, Susan was at his side.

“Grandfather, what is it?”

“Oh please, child, it’s just this confounded headache again. Don’t fuss.”

“Are you all right?” Instinctively, Barbara had stepped forward too.

“Well, it’s no longer any of your concern, hmm?” The Doctor straightened up, a little of the colour returning to his cheeks. “You must go if that is what you wish – but no one is leaving before I know that it is safe for you to do so… At least allow me that.”

“But I’m sure Barbara will stay, if you ask her, Grandfather.” Susan looked hopefully from the old man to Barbara.

“No,” replied the Doctor firmly. “She must only stay if that is her choice. Once I have ascertained the threat, then she can leave if she wishes.”

At that moment, a shower of sparks arced across the dismantled console, and a whining scream broke from outside. Somehow the Doctor’s machine had re-engaged.

The four ran back outside to find the junkyard gates thrown open in a fury. There raged the vacant silhouette of the policeman. Pulsing with incandescent energy, it made a perfect hole in the dark and fog. It swiped at a pile of tires in an uncoordinated attack, searching blindly for the travellers.

“Listen to me, all of you,” demanded the Doctor. “Chesterton, over there; Susan, you move over there, and Barbara, you stay precisely where you are. We must keep ourselves equidistant. Is that clear?”

Without question, the three did as they were bid, moving around the policeman while keeping well out of its reach. Immediately the creature stopped, clearly confused as to which target to aim for.

“You see,” cried the Doctor, “the attraction of opposing charges – like hunting by instinct.”

Barbara had backed away nearest the open gates, when she suddenly caught sight of a streetlamp burning through the fog. In that moment, the pull of familiarity was all too strong. Glancing back towards the Doctor and the dangers of his world, her resolve suddenly broke.

“I’m sorry,” she cried, and with that, she turned and ran.

“Barbara, come back!” shouted Ian, but with the circle broken, the creature now had a definite direction. Bursting forward, it made a lunge for Susan. Instinctively, Ian moved to push it aside.

“No, don’t touch it,” screamed the girl, but it was too late. Ian felt his hand sink into the shape of the policeman and it burned like fire. Immediately, pulling himself clear, he gasped in anguish.

Another sudden lurch and the creature made for the Doctor. Seizing his chance, Ian made a dive for one of the cables leading into the TARDIS. Then pulling with all his strength, he tightened its length right into the path of the attacking figure. Its foot caught, the creature then pitched headlong into the dissolving shape of the Police Box.

Instantaneously, there was a tremendous flash. The two entities seemed to fuse together as the policeman was completely absorbed into the howling desolation of the Police Box. Immediately, a burst of smoke coughed from the Doctor’s contraption, and all fell silent.

The creature had thankfully gone, but now the Police Box-shaped hole burned brighter than ever.

The Doctor moved to examine his now defunct machine. “A senseless waste of components.”

“Barbara,” declared Ian. “We have to go after her.” He stumbled to his feet, still cradling his burnt hand, but the Doctor was suddenly before him

“Chesterton, stop. You’ll put all our lives in danger.

“But we can’t just let her go. There might be more of those things out there.” Ian tried to push past, but the old man held him with remarkable strength.

“She is challenging the stability of our presence here,” insisted the Doctor. “If you follow her now, then you’ll only make things worse.”

“Grandfather’s right, Ian,” pleaded Susan. “You’ll be leaving Barbara open to even greater danger.”

“The only way to help her is to help me; now do I make myself clear?”

Ian stopped struggling and faced the old man. “All right, Doctor. Have it your way.”

“Very good, my boy. I’m relieved to see you at least have retained your trust in me.”

Ian nodded, but couldn’t help staring out into the mists. “Trust is earned, Doctor. Remember that the next time you see Barbara.”

The Doctor did not reply, but motioned to Susan. “Would you check the fault locator, my dear?”

“Yes, Grandfather,” said the girl, hastening for the TARDIS.

“Well, Doctor,” prompted Ian confidentially. “What was that thing?”

“A shadow,” muttered the Doctor. “No different from our anomaly there.” He gestured towards the glowing Police Box. “That poor unfortunate must also have been displaced by our arrival.” Eyes narrowed, he seemed deep in thought. “Somehow our presence here must have affected his actions… then he too became part of our pattern of events. Caught between two worlds, you might say.”

“Yes, but he looked in pain.”

“Oh, please don’t be so tiresome, dear boy. As soon as this universe dissolves, he’ll be right as rain, back where he belongs. He won’t remember a thing about it.”

Ian nearly exploded. “When this universe does *what?*”

“Yes,” expounded the Doctor. “Don’t you understand, Chesterton? This world is only viable while the two versions of the TARDIS remain here. As soon as our original selves depart, then there will no longer be any conflict between the two possible realities. Both worlds will then merge.”

“And then what happens to us?”

The Doctor seemed to hesitate, weighing up the possibilities. “I think in all likelihood, if we haven’t left by then, the TARDIS will be dragged into an infinite paradox.”

A sudden gasp made them both turn. “We can’t leave her, Grandfather,” said Susan. “We must find Barbara before it’s too late.”

“My child, I hadn’t noticed you there, I…”

“I’ll go, Grandfather. The time distortion won’t affect me.”

"No," insisted the Doctor. "You saw the policeman. We may also have affected others. I had better go myself."

"No," interjected Ian, sternly. "We need you to get the ship ready to depart. I'll go."

"Nonsense, my dear boy. Susan can tell you where everything goes, and you can do all the heavy lifting."

"Doctor, someone has to tell Barbara that she needs to leave her home all over again – and for what? So that she can continue travelling into unknown dangers with a man whose name she doesn't even know?"

The Doctor met the school teacher's gaze with an older sense of wisdom. "Young man, you once told me it was time to face up to my responsibilities. Now please allow me to do that."

"That's very commendable, but now really isn't the time. I'm telling you, this will sound better coming from me."

"And I am telling you, young man: the fact is that you and Barbara make up the most unstable elements in this entire universe. You remain safe as long as you stay close to the TARDIS. If you go venturing out there, you'll most likely bring the whole world collapsing in on us. Now, do I make myself clear, hmm?"

Ian wanted to protest further, but there really was no argument against the Doctor's logic. "All right, I'll help Susan – if that is all I can do."

"I'm afraid there is no other option," declared the Doctor. "I must go alone."

Barbara sat on the swing, gazing down on the view from Coal Hill. The streetlamps and cars glimmered softly, but offered no comfort of familiarity. The distant skyline was a patchwork of broken clouds as night drew back in from the west. This was no dawn she was watching. This was dusk in reverse.

From back across the field towards the school, a figure was approaching. He opened the little gate to the playground, and Barbara could make out his cloak and scarf, his fur-lined hat. Humbly, he placed his hand across his chest and addressed her.

"May I sit down?" inquired the Doctor.

"If you like," replied Barbara, solemnly.

Taking the swing next to hers, the Doctor sat down a little awkwardly.

"Ah, it's… er… it's been a while since I…"

"What do you want? You want me to go back, is that it?"

"We can't stay," said the old man seriously. "I don't think we were ever meant to be here."

"What does that mean?"

The Doctor sighed. "It means some points in time are fixed. Since you've travelled with me, you must have realized there are things we can alter – in our own small way."

"Yes, and despite what you say, I think we've done some good," insisted Barbara.

"Oh, undoubtedly, my dear, but there are also events that must go unchallenged; else they undo everything we have worked for. You see?"

"Not really, no," replied Barbara glibly.

"Why, my dear Barbara. Don't you see how important you are, hmm?"

"Me?"

"Indeed, yes – you and Chesterton. The moment you stepped aboard my ship has become a fixed point in time. Can you not see how events are still revolving around that instant? Think of what we've already achieved… And think of all we've yet to do." He stopped for a moment, deep in contemplation. "You've most certainly had an effect on me, both of you. Yes, quite an effect. I think you were never meant to return home quite so early." Then as if coming back to himself: "You must be a very important young lady indeed, hmm?"

Barbara was incredulous. "But you're talking about destiny."

"I don't like the word *destiny*," replied the Doctor with a glint. "It sounds too much like responsibility to me."

She gave him a dry look. "Yes, I can see why that might not be a word you'd be too fond of."

The old man's smile was firm but not unkind. "You must understand, my dear, the danger we're all in. This universe is too unstable, and soon it will collapse leaving us trapped."

Barbara quickly turned her attention back to the view. "I knew this wasn't my home," she whispered.

"Hmm?"

Barbara nodded. "You see, this is the view from Primrose Hill. It's not Coal Hill at all."

"Space and time are folding back on themselves," agreed the Doctor.

"But all those people down there," insisted Barbara, surveying the view. "It's Earth. This is my time, my home." Once again she could feel the tears welling in her eyes. "How can I leave it again?"

Reaching across, the Doctor placed a hand warmly on hers. "I know what it's like," he said, "to leave one's home; to be cut off from those one cares about… to have no choice." It was an altogether darker sadness which now drew the old man's features.

Barbara shook her head. "We still know so little about you."

The Doctor gave her a weary smile. "Oh, I'd say we're learning to trust one another, wouldn't you?" Then looking out over the impossible view, he considered: "We may still have some way to go, my dear, but I think with a little patience we can learn to help each other, hmm?"

Barbara wanted to smile, but one question persisted: "Doctor, can you promise me that you can get us safely back to our own time – even if it's not today?"

Uncomfortably, the Doctor fidgeted with the edges of his cloak. "No, no I'm afraid I can't, my dear. Our future is still very much hidden in the stars."

Suddenly Barbara couldn't look at him. "Then you're telling me I have to leave all over again?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

Barbara shook her head. “But I don’t know that I can, Doctor.”

“You must,” he insisted. “To have any hope of ever seeing your world again, you must leave behind all that you feel here.”

Now Barbara gripped the Doctor’s hand in return. How could she go back? That life was so undeniably alien to her.

Standing, the Doctor gently took both of her hands in his. “I know how this feels, Barbara. Believe me, I know, but this is not your home. This is not your time, merely time’s shadow, and very soon it won’t be anything at all.”

Barbara gave a long sigh, but before she could respond, a sudden burst of thunder rent the air. Then above them, a jagged seam of lightning cracked the heavens. Only it didn’t fade. It hung there impossibly motionless in the night sky.

“Doctor, what’s happening?” cried Barbara.

“It’s the time dissolution. The effects are starting to spread.”

Barbara allowed herself to be hauled up as, to her horror, another burst further split the sky. Now the creeping fissures were beginning to yawn above them, emitting an intense alien glare.

“The instability, it’s growing,” cautioned the Doctor. “We must get back to the TARDIS. Our original selves are about to leave, and we have perhaps moments before this entire world fragments.”

Barbara could only nod as the Doctor grabbed her hand. The ground was beginning to shake as they ran back together in the direction of the TARDIS.

Barbara and the Doctor reached the junkyard just as another flash split the billowing firmament. The quality of light was beginning to change. Like strong moonlight, thought Barbara, or the moment before a storm cloud breaks.

“You must hurry,” cried Susan, silhouetted in the TARDIS doorway. “The instability’s building.”

“I know, child, I know,” grumbled the Doctor. Clearly he was not enjoying these last-minute exertions. However, he quickly turned back to Barbara. “Well, my dear?”

For a moment, Barbara shook her head. That impossible sight: light flooding from the TARDIS’s gleaming white interior. It was an atmosphere entirely different from the still atrophy of this cold November night. Once again whole new worlds awaited her. Then Barbara felt a weight to the air, the building charge of another shock. A sudden flush of static, and she couldn’t tell whether it felt like a storm arriving or departing. This was not her world. It wasn’t any kind of world. Her only safety lay through the doors of a battered old Police Box.

Finally Barbara nodded, took a deep breath, and clutching the Doctor’s hand, ran back into the TARDIS.

“Shut the doors, Susan,” commanded the Doctor reaching the controls. His hands moved automatically, but his gaze was fixed on the scanner. “The pocket

dimension is dissolving. It looks like we were just in time." Nevertheless, the old man still appeared intensely grave.

"But what about us, Doctor?" insisted Ian.

"Yes, Grandfather, can we dematerialize?" added Susan.

"We've already left conterminous time, but we need a destination, else we'll be drawn back into the moment of our original departure…" The Doctor moved to another part of the console, considering. "Trapped, travelling in circles forever."

"Well, it doesn't matter where we go now, Doctor," declared Ian. "Just get us out of here."

"I'm afraid that it does matter, young man," countered the Doctor. "If I can't calculate our precise course before our memories fade, then I could steer us into any number of catastrophic events."

"What do you mean?" gasped Barbara.

"Of course," stammered Susan. "The timelines are realigning. We won't remember this."

Ian shook his head. "What are you talking about, Susan?"

"It's the law of conservation. Because these events are happening to us in a different timeline, we won't remember them once this dimension dissolves."

"What?" Barbara was appalled. "You mean we'll simply forget everything that's just happened?"

"I'm afraid it's even worse than that," confirmed the Doctor. "Any miscalculation now could send us into a supernova, a black hole or even the birth of a star. Now please, all of you, I must work." The Doctor's hands were moving in quick complex operations about the controls. The TARDIS engines wheezed and groaned their complaint. Up on the scanner, a myriad of fractals began deteriorating into a mass of swirling colours. They were falling into the void.

"The coordinates just aren't matching up," protested the Doctor. "I don't think I can break us free." The entire control room was beginning to shudder.

"But you must, Grandfather," pleaded Susan.

"Is there no way out, Doctor?" shouted Ian.

"I can disable the TARDIS's emergency materialization substructure," muttered the Doctor. "That might give us some limited access to our own timestream." He was now working for their lives, moving around the various controls at a merciless speed.

As the whine of the TARDIS engines grew louder, the room began to shudder more violently. Assorted pieces of antique furniture pitched to the floor, and Barbara had to brace herself against the console. She was beginning to feel that old familiar knot in her stomach once again. Then she looked across the controls at the strange old man who stood tirelessly against their fate. This complete stranger had taken time to sit and comfort her while the world collapsed around them. That was time which they now desperately needed. For a second, he looked up from his work, just long enough to offer her an encouraging smile.

Barbara smiled back, and in an instant she had the answer: the Fast Return switch. Now that the TARDIS knew its last location, it was already pre-programmed. In the heat of the moment, Barbara watched herself reach out and hit the switch.

Instantly, the pitch of the engines changed. Barbara tried to shout out what she had done, when the Doctor suddenly interjected.

"Yes," he declared ecstatically, "yes, I do believe the coordinates are finally matching up."

Everyone now watched the Doctor's efforts in earnest, but something was wrong. The engines were now roaring. Barbara had to cup her hands to her ears. Gazing up at the scanner screen, she could see nothing but the void – no wait. Not void – a starfield. They were in deep space once again. She steadied herself on the console and almost laughed. How could she ever get used to this kind of travel – the majesty of it? Undoubtedly, they were at the beginning of a whole new adventure.

Then all in an instant, the whine of the engines cut out with a terrific boom. The control room lurched dangerously to its side, and the four travellers were thrown to the ground unconscious. They had landed back in their own universe with a bang.

Someone Took the Words Away

by Roger McCoy

Some things should not be left unsaid.

At least, that was what Rose was thinking as she saw the Doctor working at the TARDIS console. She watched him from a distance, sure that she was unnoticed. Did he ever sleep? She should have been sleeping right now, but there were too many things going through her mind. She still didn't quite know what to make of the Doctor, this madman in a black leather jacket with whom she had run away. This being who could be jovial almost to the point of lunacy one moment, then astonishingly harsh the next. This man who had given her the chance to finally come to know her father.

Rose's father had died when she was still a baby, but the Doctor had taken her through time using the TARDIS to give her a chance to see what her dad was like. She had taken the opportunity to try and change history by saving his life, wreaking havoc and nearly destroying the Earth in the process.

"What do you want, Rose? You should be sleeping now."

He hadn't shown any signs of distraction as he continued to shuffle around the console adjusting seemingly random settings. Rose wondered if he had a preternatural urge to appear busy, even when no one was looking. Or had he known she was coming somehow?

"I couldn't sleep."

He stopped for a moment and looked her in the eye with a mix of curiosity and concern. "One of the Calmanian Dragons get loose? Ace used to complain that they made an awful ruckus when she was trying to rest up. I'll go check the cages."

Rose tittered a bit as he made for the door. Was he just having fun with her? It was hard to tell. "No, that wasn't it. I…" She was searching for the words, and he didn't appear eager to wait to hear them. "I said I was sorry—"

"And that's good enough for me, Rose."

If he wanted her to be quiet, she wasn't having it. "—but I never really said thank you." She sniffled as a tear came to her eye. "Thank you for letting me…" She choked, unable to continue.

"Hey, now…" The Time Lord, cold one moment and fatherly the next, drew to her side and gave her a hug. "You didn't need to." He pulled away almost abruptly, holding her by the shoulders.

He turned back to the console, but she continued: "And I know I've said it before, but I really am sorry." Surely he understood, but she felt a need to elaborate. "I should've thought that… You know, if you could change things – I mean *really* change things – you'd have stopped the Daleks from…" She trailed off, wishing she had never started speaking.

The Doctor stared into her eyes. "From invading."

It was a foolish thing to say – she knew it even as she said it – but it still came out: "Right. From… destroying your people."

He returned to the console with a cold, frantic fury. “The Daleks didn’t destroy the Time Lords, Rose, but I’ll thank you not to talk about it again.” He slammed a lever down on the console. Rose wasn’t sure if it even did anything or if he just wanted to slam something.

Part of Rose was screaming at her that she should just apologize and go. Had she misjudged how much he trusted her? She was so stunned that she didn’t know what to do. “But if the Daleks—”

Something screeched and she fell to the floor as the entire TARDIS shook.

The conversation forgotten, the Doctor became protective again. “Rose, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she replied, regaining her footing and brushing herself off despite the conspicuous lack of dust in the grungy-looking control room.

“We’ve stopped,” he said, gazing high up the centre console, although she couldn’t say at what.

“I noticed.”

He turned towards the entry doors of the TARDIS. “Let’s find out why.” It was clear that he was eager to escape the previous conversation, and she was relieved to have a fresh opportunity to keep her foot well out of her mouth.

The TARDIS doors swung wide open. The Doctor laughed as he peered out the open doorway, but Rose couldn’t see clearly out the doors from where she stood grasping a handrail. “What is it?”

“Come take a look.”

Her eyes widened as she drew closer.

“But that’s impossible!”

“Isn’t it just?”

She stared out into open space.

“But… Shouldn’t we be freezing or exploding or something?”

“Just relax, Rose.” He patted the wall of the TARDIS affectionately. “The old girl knows how to take care of us. Just hold back the urge to step out for a stroll.”

Taking her eyes off the vast expanse of stars directly in front of her, she gazed up, seeing a metal ceiling extending out above the TARDIS doorway. The Doctor poked his head out. She wanted to panic for a second, but if it was safe for her to be standing by this open door into space, she supposed it wasn’t much of a stretch that it would be safe right outside the door as well. She followed his lead with caution. Inspecting what turned out to be a large metal cylinder positioned directly above the TARDIS, she spotted a hatch. Probing beyond it, she saw that it was much more than a cylinder: it was an airlock at the end of a capsule. And that capsule was just a small protrusion out of the object that stretched out before her: a space station.

The look of the station felt more familiar than futuristic, resembling stations she’d seen in reports on the Beeb far more than stations she had actually visited like Platform One or Satellite Five. But, while the station above her was not nearly as massive as the habitats that would be built in the distant future, Rose realized she had never really grasped the size of the stations built in her own lifetime. She felt as if she were standing on the caboose of a freight train gazing

down to the other end. Or, perhaps more accurately, standing underneath one. The station stretched out before her, but she couldn't get a clear view of the entirety of the beige behemoth from where she stood. She imagined that if she pushed herself out of the TARDIS, it would take minutes just to float to the other end. Peeking out in the distance, she could spy the station's arms branching out at a slight angle like a giant seesaw leaning to one side in an imaginary playground.

The Doctor grinned. "Shall we knock?"

As confused as she was, she couldn't stifle a grin of her own at the beautiful absurdity of it all. The Doctor grabbed on to the top of the TARDIS doorway and kicked himself out, his legs and body floating upwards in an arc as his hands stayed secured to the doorway. While the TARDIS was providing air and heat for him somehow, it clearly drew the line at gravity. There was a thump as the Doctor's feet collided with the station exterior. He hooked his feet into a railing and stabilized himself on the hatch as his leather jacket fluttered about. Rose empathized with the garment: it was as if the jacket was as confused regarding the workings of air and gravity and the lack thereof as she was. Rose continued to stare at the now upside-down Doctor.

He smiled widely. "You just going to stand there with your feet in the air, or are you going to join me?"

"You're one to talk!"

He had released his hands from the doorway and was now hanging outside the TARDIS like a child dangling precariously from a set of monkey bars.

She reached her hand out, but he pulled away. "Wait, hold on. Let me check something." He pulled his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and pointed it at the station. The small device had no obvious display or readouts, yet clearly it was communicating with him as he waved it over the hatch. "Airlock. Should be safe. Seems that there's air and life support inside." Well, it was good to know he thought to check for that on occasion. He adjusted the settings on the sonic screwdriver until the hatch slid open. Replacing the device in his pocket, he reached a hand out to Rose. "Coming?" he asked, wearing an infectious grin.

Even if she had lost some certainty regarding how much he trusted her, she knew that she trusted him completely. She grabbed his hands and yelped a bit as he swung her heels-over-head into the hatch. Rose cringed when her legs impacted the metal edge, then she kicked around awkwardly until she was secure enough to let go of his hands and grab the hatch herself.

"You all right?"

"Yeah," she lied, disoriented, dizzy, and a bit nauseated. The confusing sights made her stomach turn. From this perspective, it was the TARDIS that now appeared to be awkwardly placed upside-down on the station. It was an odd thing to take in: an old upturned blue Police Box balanced precariously on a fragile-looking lamp that seemed no more sturdy than a garden candle. And yet she forgot all about both the odd sight and the discomfort in her stomach when she peeked up and her entire field of vision was filled by a planet: Earth.

Rose gasped in air that shouldn't even have existed. It was like nothing she had experienced before. True, she had seen her homeworld from space before

when she was on Platform One in the distant future, but this was different. She wasn't looking through some viewport at something that may have well have been on a television. The world felt almost close enough to touch, hovering larger than life right over her head. The clouds shifted over the surface in winsome patterns as the waters of the Atlantic churned, forming the circulatory system of a living organism that was more massive than anything she had experienced, and yet seemed so fragile. She could even see England, but her home felt so small and delicate that it may as well have been made of papier-mâché. Off in the distance lay a bright but otherwise unassuming yellow star that she barely recognized as the sun. The star that she had seen nearly every day of her life felt so distant and unfamiliar. It was all too much to absorb.

Trying to ground herself back in the current situation, she gingerly pulled herself through the hatch and inside the airlock. "Where are we?"

"*Avalōkana mañca tīna*." He swung around inside the hatch and sonicked it closed. He floated beside her as he explained: "Earth orbit. Probably twenty sixty-three, give or take a few months."

She tried to ask "where" again, but the word stuck in her throat.

Seeing her confusion, the Doctor tried to clarify. "Indian space station. Observation platform—" His mouth tried to move again, but no words were spoken. He regarded the sonic screwdriver, apparently disconcerted. "Funny. TARDIS translation circuit must be getting some interference." He shook it off. "Let's see who's at home." He pointed the screwdriver at the inner airlock, which obediently opened.

Rose slipped one hand over the other as she followed the ladder leading into the roughly cylindrical module. The cylinder was perhaps seven to eight metres in diameter on the inside. The opposite wall was a good fifteen metres away. Much like the outside of the station, the inside seemed not far removed from spacecraft from her own time period: curved white walls covered with cabinets, handholds, controls, and even wiring.

There were windows towards the middle of the module through which Rose could see other areas of the station in the distance against the backdrop of space. The walls towards the far end were busier than those nearby, with cabinets and drawers covering the walls near a hatch that presumably led to the other modules. The Doctor floated beside her, sizing everything up.

The far hatch opened, and three dark-skinned astronauts hovered in. To Rose's left was a striking young woman in her mid-twenties, her hair up in a frazzled bun. She was oriented sideways with the bun pointing vaguely towards a scrawny man who looked as if he hadn't shaved in months. Floating opposite the younger woman was another woman, this one in her forties, maybe fifties; it was hard to tell. Rose noted that each of the three had braids running around the ends of their shirt sleeves. If the number of braids was any indication, the older woman was the mission leader. The lines on her face bore her age, although the other two didn't seem much better off. Most notable was what all three held in common: their faces were frozen in expressions of sheer terror.

Ignoring their frightened visages, her companion greeted them more or less in his usual fashion: “Hello. I’m the Doctor, she’s Rose Tyler, and you… don’t understand one word of this.”

“They can’t speak English?” Rose asked cautiously, hoping that the unexpected arrivals were the only source of the astronauts’ fear.

“No, not these folks. Only Hindi. Private mission.”

She wondered if there was more to it, as the insignia and uniforms had a military feel to them, but that wasn’t her biggest concern. “It won’t translate?”

“Something’s wrong,” the Doctor said, displaying a gift for stating the obvious. He tried to speak to the crew again, but no words came out.

“Can…” She was preparing to ask if he spoke Hindi, but Rose choked on her words much as the Doctor had a moment before.

“I know billions… languages, but…” The Doctor didn’t even try to finish the sentence. Befuddled, he examined the screwdriver again in confusion.

“What’s going on?”

The Doctor was obviously trying to sort something out. He regarded her cautiously.

“Say ‘rutabaga.’”

She turned towards the Indian astronauts, wondering what they thought of this, but they remained quietly suspended where they were. She tried to say the word but failed.

He tried again. “‘Cantaloupe,’” he said, gesturing as if he were cupping a cantaloupe in his hand.

She tried and failed once more. He mirrored the gesture with his other hand as if he held two of the fruit. Rose feigned a shocked expression for a moment, even now not being able to resist an opportunity to needle him. He momentarily had a confused air about him, but then he gasped and returned the shocked expression disapprovingly.

“Cantaloupes,” she said, a bit surprised to be able to accomplish what had felt so natural a moment before. He tried to speak again, but it was his turn to fail. She was hardly a lip reader, but it appeared as though he had tried to echo her previous word but could not get the sound out.

The Doctor’s brow furrowed with deadly seriousness. His voice was husky as he explained: “There is something eating our words.”

It sounded absurd, but Rose couldn’t think of a better explanation. Had they said the same word twice since they had entered the station? It was true: the moment one of them spoke up, it was as if the words they uttered were off-limits for further use. But why? The whole thing seemed strangely precise too – she had managed to pluralize the fruit that the Doctor had mentioned – but his conclusion matched everything she had seen.

“How?”

“Stop wasting…” He grappled for a word. “Terms!” he commanded, then immediately ignored his own order. “Synonyms work. But why?”

She regarded the three Indian astronauts, who still hadn’t reacted much. They still wore the expressions that Rose had initially taken for terror, but their

expressions were so consistent that they felt meaningless at this point. Rose startled as the mission leader broke the silence.

"Mujhē fīḍa."

Rose looked towards the Doctor with confusion, hoping he understood.

"She said 'Feed me.'" Rose made eye contact with the Doctor and gestured towards the astronauts, hoping he'd try to speak to them again. If he understood Hindi, surely he could speak it. The Doctor opened his mouth to speak but failed once again. The woman spoke instead.

"*Feed me*."

Rose felt a chill as she turned her head towards the woman. This didn't make any sense. The astronauts didn't speak English, right? And even if the commander knew English, how could she repeat the Doctor's words? This contradicted everything that they'd figured out so far.

Maybe they were only precluded from repeating words that they had said themselves. But she and the Doctor couldn't repeat each other's words. Could it be that she had become so close to the Doctor that whatever was stealing their words treated them as a single mind? Two sides of the same coin. She felt close enough to him that it didn't seem *too* farfetched. The English words were clearly unfamiliar on the commander's tongue, so it wouldn't surprise Rose if it was the first time she'd ever spoken them; if she was right about her own connection with the Doctor being unique, the woman wouldn't be able to use them again.

"*Feed me*."

Okay, obviously that was wishful thinking. Get your head on straight, Rose, she thought to herself, realizing that she had become so lost in thought, she didn't even notice the three crew members push off from the other side and begin to float towards her.

The Doctor reacted as he so often did in times of trouble: "Run!"

She scoffed, not sure whether to laugh or cry. He had been telling her to run since the moment they met, and now he would never be able to do so again. One last time to tell her to run, and he had wasted it. There was nowhere *to* run. In fact, there was no *way* to run. He'd have to fall back on his other way of fixing problems: fast-talking his way out of…

Well, Rose thought, realizing talking wasn't an option either. *Now we're* really *in trouble.*

The three terror-stricken astronauts floated across the room swiftly with arms outstretched as if to grab the visitors. Rose felt a shove, but it came from her side. She turned her head as she was flung to the wall, realizing that the Doctor had shoved her out of the way, which in turn sent him crashing into the opposite wall.

The younger woman must have been the strongest of the three, since her push-off had sent her flying ahead of the others. She floated right between where the Doctor and Rose had been a moment before, but with nothing to grab in order to change her course, she continued floating on into the airlock that the visitors had just vacated. The other two passed shortly thereafter, but they weren't centred as precisely and simply collided with the wall surrounding the airlock door.

The Doctor grabbed a handhold on the side and tried to shout at Rose: "…way!" His head indicated towards the far door. He tried to shout again, but Rose already understood. She awkwardly pulled herself by the handhold and used her feet to push off to the far end of the module. As she floated past the windows, she heard a slight buzzing noise and turned back to see that the Doctor had sonicked the far airlock shut, trapping the youngest of the crew inside. The other two had pushed themselves off the wall to follow Rose. The Doctor zoomed by her, having expertly pushed himself towards the hatch leading to the rest of the station.

The next module lay perpendicular to the one leading from the airlock, branching off to the left and right. The Doctor scanned back and forth, silently mouthing to himself as he quickly pointed back and forth between the two ends. Of all the words to conserve, Rose thought, shaking her head a little. *I don't think we're likely to need "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe" again anytime soon*. The Doctor picked a direction, grabbed her right hand with his left, and yanked her along.

They flew from room to room hand in hand. She found quickly that she had to keep her arm stiffened in order to avoid overtaking the Doctor or slamming into him. They had no time to spare, and the two pursuers were far more certain in their movements than Rose was.

Soon their course terminated in a room filled with so many controls and displays that it must have been a command module. The Doctor again used his screwdriver to seal the door. Unfortunately, it meant they were…

"Trapped," Rose said, her pulse racing.

"Think!" The Doctor appeared to try to shout it at himself a second time but failed, only increasing his frustration. He examined the consoles. "Destroyed communications equipment. Astronauts did… so… creature wouldn't escape."

Rose heard strains of metal as the astronauts outside tried to force the doors open.

"*Doctor! Rose! Feed me!*"

Rose's eyes were wide as she turned back towards the Doctor. "…knows us!"

"Learning. Stealing vocabulary, thoughts, ideas." He kept adjusting the sonic, alternately scanning and trying to reinforce the door to what limited extent he could. "…readings."

He interpreted the readings, and his countenance fell.

"They're from Gallifrey."

A moment later he tilted his head curiously and noted, "Huh. Contractions…"

"Time Lords?" Rose called out, ignoring the digression.

The Doctor muttered to himself. "Living weapons. Omega arsenal. Rassilon's furies. Abhorrent swarm. Hope eater." He paused, pained. "Moment."

The Doctor let out a wordless scream. She watched his fury as he pulled his arm back as if to strike the wall, but just as his arm was raised high, it loosed

once more. He brought his hands back to his face, defeated. He looked as if he would sink to the ground if gravity would only cooperate. “My fault.”

Her heart reached out to him, but the sounds at the door meant she had to bring him back to his senses. “Without…” She searched for a word she could still say. “Instant… spare.”

He got himself together. “Shutdown code!” he yelled, pointing to where the astronauts must be floating on the other side. A shutdown code for the creature – the weapon – that was taking them over? He hesitated. “However, requires… oration.”

Rose needed to find words they hadn’t used already if she was going to communicate with him. “Which… dialect?” It wasn’t the word she needed, but it would have to do. He hesitated, so she prompted. “Gallifreyan?”

“Yes.”

She nodded furiously for him to proceed.

He raised his hands palms up in frustration. “Password?” She assumed that he didn’t really expect her to know the phrase to deactivate the weapon, but it was clear he had no idea where to begin.

“Guess!”

He remained silent. She didn’t know why he hesitated. It certainly couldn’t hurt to try, no matter how unlikely he was to get it right. Had the creature already consumed Gallifreyan? But he hadn’t even opened his mouth.

He wasn’t *unable* to try, she realized. He was *unwilling* to try.

“Come…” Rose pleaded, futilely gesturing for him to continue. “Please!”

The door blasted open, and the two remaining astronauts renewed their pursuit towards Rose and the Doctor. As the heavily bearded man advanced towards Rose, she tried again to plea for help, but failed.

The Doctor opened his mouth, and the two attackers went limp, floating aimlessly. He had begun to shout things that Rose couldn’t understand. The two astronauts had simply stopped moving as they literally absorbed every word he was saying. Rose pushed the now-catatonic bearded man away, in turn shoving herself back against the wall.

She didn’t understand the words the Doctor intoned; it was all Greek to her. He had to be speaking Gallifreyan. The language was strange and beautiful, unlike any one tongue she had heard before. It was difficult for her ear to catch the sounds, some of which were common to Earth languages, and some of which were completely alien. London was a cosmopolitan area; she’d heard plenty of languages spoken there, yet she couldn’t find anything to properly compare it to.

The Time Lord shouted words and combinations of words through an aura of pain. His face was near tears, but he kept shouting, roaring, screaming, and howling everything he could think of. The two crew members remained immobilized as long as he continued.

The Doctor nodded his head to indicate the exit as he continued screaming. Rose kicked herself off the wall past the frozen crew and through the hatch. She pushed herself from handhold to bulkhead, growing more confident in her movements as she made her way back to the station centre. The Doctor’s screaming voice grew louder as he caught up. She glanced back and saw the

crew following awkwardly, the immobilizing effect fading quickly with distance from the Doctor.

She darted her eyes between the airlock and the unexplored module. They could be cornered by two or surrounded by three; neither was an appealing option. The Doctor inclined towards the airlock, his words faltering momentarily, and their pursuers continued to close in.

Rose raced back to the airlock while the Doctor continued using any words he could think of. She could hear the youngest astronaut still trying to escape the airlock, unable to overpower the door alone. The Doctor frantically gestured at Rose, but she couldn't figure out what he wanted. He sighed loudly in exasperation. She felt overwhelmed. It was becoming difficult to think. This wasn't right; she didn't shut down under stress.

He threw his hands over his head in frustration, then roughly grabbed her and shoved her away from the hatch. He released the airlock, and the young woman floated by, intersecting where Rose had been a moment before. Why hadn't the younger woman been affected? Were the three all controlled separately? The Doctor's voice strained while he rendered the third pursuer inert by sheer volume of vocabulary, but gaps were starting to appear where he must have been trying to re-use terms.

The Doctor pointed furiously at the airlock, but something felt wrong. He floated over to grab her while he screamed Gallifreyan invectives, but she grabbed on to the wall and held on.

"Wait! *Doctor!*"

He froze in confusion. Rose was having trouble thinking, but she knew that she shouldn't have been able to call out to him like that.

His face fell.

"Infected."

She strained to process what had happened. She felt something: a connection with the other astronauts, as if they shared part of a mind, but she still felt separate, felt something new growing inside her consciousness.

"F… f…"

She tried to fight even while she was losing control of her own voice.

"F… feed… me."

What was remaining of her mind observed as the Doctor closed the airlock once more without leaving. They couldn't leave. They couldn't take this thing with them.

The Doctor screamed in fury, feeding and strengthening the creatures in his attempts to stop them. She could see in his eyes that he would risk anything to shut them down and get her back, but the dejection that she saw was more than a fear of failure. He was losing something… something special… What was it? Not just himself; he showed no visible signs of infection, so she guessed he was immune to being possessed by the Gallifreyan weapon. His…

His language.

As Rose's last vestiges of consciousness started to slip away, she understood what he was sacrificing. Not just any language, but *his* language. His *first* language. The language of a people who had nearly died out. A language

that would die with him. He had lost everything else, every last vestige of his people, and now he was giving up his mother tongue in a desperate attempt to get Rose back.

He halted, out of breath. She could see in his crestfallen visage that he was out of ideas, out of words, out of hope. "Apologies… very… sorry."

"Doctor…" She intoned his name as her mind faded, unsure whether it had been her decision to call it out. *No. Can't give up. Not yet.* She felt something. A hint buried in a corner of her mind that she wouldn't be able to reach for much longer. Something that had leaked through from the creature that was controlling her. She knew what the Doctor would have to do, what he would have to say, but she didn't know if she had enough control to communicate it. With so much command of her own body and mind gone, she ceded control and let the creature speak through her as she desperately tried to sway her own intonations.

"Doctor. Doctor! *Doctor!*"

It was over. She was a prisoner in her own body, half-consciously observing as her arms reached out towards him. If he hadn't understood, there was no more she could do.

The Time Lord was surrounded. Rose's arms grabbed the Doctor and pulled him towards her. Her hand reached out to his temple, strengthening the connection between the weapon and the Doctor. As the other three closed in, she felt a hint of the connection that was being formed with him. An echo of an echo. Pain. Suffering. Guilt. *So much guilt.* It was all she could feel as she faded away.

She would never know for sure if he had decoded her message, felt the answer through the connection, or simply made one last desperate attempt, but she jolted back to consciousness as he made one final Gallifreyan cry. A cry that could only have meant one thing:

Doctor.

And as she heard the cry, she felt herself return to consciousness sharply, as if she'd been jolted awake by a noisy alarm.

"Doctor!" Rose cried out, this time saying it completely of her own volition. She clumsily tried to come towards him to embrace him, but just found herself flailing in zero gravity as tears of joy formed in her eyes. She laughed as she realized that the tears were not running down her cheeks or floating off, but simply accumulating together to form two large transparent beads. A wobbly image of the Doctor appeared before her, and then she felt his embrace. He laughed and playfully flicked the ever-growing globules from each of her eyes. Her vision restored, she saw the tears scattering off into the capsule past the three astronauts, who were sobbing themselves.

The man and the younger woman hugged tightly, then pulled the commander into the embrace as well. Rose realized that she had no idea how long they had been trapped in this state, but it must have been jarring to finally wake up again. They cried out to each other, but their voices were rough from the lack of practice.

After a few seconds, they released from the embrace, and the commander floated back against the wall. Her arm moved stiffly as she reached her hand up

and felt the dried skin on her face. She brushed her hand over her black hair, feeling her disheveled bun. She looked at the Doctor with a look of pain and eyes full of gratitude.

"Hello… Doctor?" she said, her voice cracking. With the interference gone, the TARDIS translated for them once more. "My name… I'm Commander Divya Banerjee, and…" She seemed to be sorting her thoughts. "I don't know what agency you're with, but I… I don't have the words to thank you."

"I wouldn't worry," he said through a weary smile. "Just out of practice, I'm sure. Besides," he said, growing serious, "I don't deserve any of your thanks. But when you do find someone who deserves it," he said, trying to smile again, "the words will be waiting right where you left them."

The Doctor sat in the outer edge of the control room. Rose hesitated to disturb him, but once again found that she could not stop herself.

"Doctor, what was that thing?"

He tossed the screwdriver from hand to hand. "I don't know, Rose. I don't have all the answers."

He was being coy. "But you have *some* of them." He ignored her. "I saw you taking readings when it deactivated. What do you know?"

The Doctor met her eyes. "Fifty years it floated there. Waiting for me. A cruel joke from an old friend, I think." He became lost in his own thinking again. "But how did he do it?" he muttered to himself.

Cryptic, as always. "Why would anyone do this?"

"I have enemies, Rose. You don't survive a Time War without making enemies."

Friend or enemy – which was it? He wanted to say something. She *knew* he wanted to say something. But what? "Who did this, Doctor? How did they get weapons from your people?"

"Rose… The Daleks didn't destroy my people."

The Daleks? Why would he mention… But she knew he was right: it couldn't have been the Daleks. He may have felt he carried the weight of the world, but the overwhelming guilt she sensed wasn't just because he was a survivor. It wasn't merely because he had *failed* to stop something.

He had a hand in the destruction himself.

He *had* to have in order for his burden to be this heavy.

The Doctor sighed and struck a railing. "Blast it…"

He wasn't going to talk about it. She knew there was no way he was going to talk about it, but he hadn't just let it slip out either; he had trusted her with something, something that he obviously hadn't wanted her to know. She wasn't going to ask. She had faith in him.

"Rose, do you know how old I am?"

Changing the subject. Standard procedure for him, but she couldn't blame him this time. "You told me nine hundred or something."

"I lied." He smirked solemnly. "Well, I did and I didn't. I always lie and never lie. Rose, I'm nine hundred in Earth years, but I'm closer to twelve

hundred in Time Lord years. Not that it matters. I don't even keep track, but she…" He pointed vaguely at the control room. "She likes to keep track. Likes to know. Likes to lord it over me sometimes, I think, even though she's *not getting any younger herself*," he yelled out in the general direction of the console, although a smirk betrayed his affection. Rose didn't think she'd ever fully understand the Doctor's relationship with the TARDIS.

"You know, when people used to ask me my age, I always gave it in Gallifreyan years. Why wouldn't I? But when the Time War came, I stood with Gallifrey, but…"

He trailed off, but he didn't have to say it. *Gallifrey wasn't his home anymore.*

"Just me now. I'm the bearer of the torch. Last of the Time Lords. The last one to speak the poems of Gallifrey or sing the songs of the Time Lords."

Rose smiled, wanting to cheer him up. He had been willing to give up so much to save her. She was glad it wasn't lost forever. "Do you think I could hear one of those songs?"

"Well, I didn't say I could sing them *well*."

She laughed and squeezed his shoulder. "I'm going back to bed. Good night, Doctor."

"Good night, Rose."

As Rose left, the Doctor continued speaking to the empty room. "And good night, old girl." He strolled to the centre of the room and caressed the central console. "You know I didn't mean anything."

And the Doctor took some time to remember and dream of his people. He could rest a bit more easily now. His burden felt lighter. It still weighed on him, but he could bear it.

Perhaps some things needed to be said.

Dying Time

by John Peel

With a loud click, the door to the starship's control deck unlocked and slid open.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow thoughtfully. *He* hadn't done that, so, logically, it was either someone inside who had, or the ship's computer. Either one meant he was on the right track. He unwound the cravat he'd been using to filter out some of the dust in the air and straightened his frock coat; if he was to meet someone on this ship at last, he'd like to look his best. He pushed the door wide enough for him to slip inside. Unlike the other doors he'd tried on this vast, empty ship, this one actually opened all the way.

"Come on, then," a gravelly voice called out. "If you mean to do me harm – you're too late, I'm already dying. If you mean to aid me – you're too late, I'm already dying."

"That appears to have covered all the options," the Doctor said. He was in the lower level of a two-tier control deck. The upper level was accessed by ramps at various intervals around the large room; he had seen no stairs at all on this craft. There were a number of computer stations scattered around the room, and large, egg-like chairs. Most were either empty or had a handful of dust on them. One of the chairs had spun slowly as he entered the deck, and he was finally able to see what the crew looked like.

As he'd already deduced from the claustrophobic corridors and rooms he'd traversed, the alien was short and stocky, with thick, powerful limbs. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, as many races tended to be, with the customary bilateralism. It was greyish and had several small tusks, as well as large, dark eyes that studied the Doctor in turn. It was a species he'd never encountered before, which was always welcome. It didn't appear to be armed, which was an encouraging sign. And it was clearly correct when it claimed to be dying. The stench of corroded time he'd scented on leaving the TARDIS had settled about it like a cloak. The threads holding its soul to life were failing fast. He was surprised this being had managed to hold on this long.

He stepped forward slowly, reassuringly. "Hello," he said, smiling. "I'm the Doctor."

The alien snorted in amusement. "Typical – I find one who'll make a house call, and he's too damned late."

Ah, a sense of humor! That was another hopeful sign. Megalomaniacs *never* took things lightly. "I'm not that kind of a doctor," the Doctor apologized.

"Good – then you're not going to tell me to eat right, take two pills and I'll be fine." The alien coughed, a deep, bellowing sound. "Because you'd be lying."

"So I see," the Doctor agreed. He grabbed a chair and pulled it over to the dying creature. There was dust on the chair, and he was about to brush it off when the alien held up a hand to stop him.

"That was Bella – he was a friend of mine." He gestured to a different chair. "Try that one instead – Carro – never did like him, and if anyone deserves to be shoved onto the floor, he's the one I'd choose."

Oh. “I think I’ll stand, after all,” the Doctor decided. He was starting to like this unfortunate alien. “What happened to you?” He gestured around. “What happened to this ship? I don’t mean to sound rude, but it’s literally a wreck. There are pockets of disintegrating matter all over the place. And where is everyone else?”

“Well, there’s the long story, and the short story,” the alien replied. “I doubt I’ve the time for the long one, so – well, we’re an unfortunate race, it seems. We’re from a world called Hydrax – ever been there?”

“Can’t say I have,” the Doctor admitted.

“Well, you’re too late now. Our sun went nova a couple of hundred years ago and evaporated the whole planet. Our ancestors watched it happen – from a safe distance, of course. They were a pretty smart lot, figured it out a couple of hundred years before it was to happen, built a vast fleet of generational ships. This one” – he waved his hand about – “is Ark 742. My great-great grandfather was the captain when it launched. We reached our destination just a week ago.” He pointed to the screen, which showed a slowly spinning globe. “Hydrax Two.” He chuckled, which brought on more coughing.

“Is there anything I can do?” the Doctor asked.

“Yes – let me finish my damned story. It’s the last I’ll ever tell, and I’ve always loved to tell stories. Well, we called the place Hydrax Two – not very imaginative, I know. I like to think that there are a lot of planets out there now named Hydrax Two – as long as they’re better than this one. We scanned the world, and it seemed viable for life. It doesn’t have the lovely, foetid swamps of home, but beggars can’t be choosers, eh? So we started to colonize the planet, moved all the passengers down and left the ship with just a skeleton crew. Then *they* arrived.”

“They?”

“Never saw them,” the captain answered. “Still don’t know who our killers were, or why they wiped us out. But a fleet of a few dozen ships arrived and opened fire on the planet.” He coughed again, and the Doctor could detect the sorrow and despair in his voice. “Annihilated everyone, destroyed everything… We’re a peaceful race, for the most part, and didn’t have a lot of weapons. It wouldn’t have made much difference if we had – they just swept through us. Killed all of our colonists and crippled this ship. Didn’t even bother finishing us off, just set about some sort of mining operations on the planet below. It gave us time to do some repairs. We knew we couldn’t do much, but we couldn’t just let our people’s killers go. When their ships lifted off from the planet, we rammed one of them.” He grunted, and coughed again. “Know what they did to us? Nothing! They just unloaded the damaged ship – which is still stuck in our ship’s side – and left us.

“And then we started dying… One by one, we started to age and then die and decay.” He gestured at the chairs and their little piles of dust. “All gone now but me – and I’m dying. I know I don’t have long left, but I’m glad I had the time to talk to you, my friend, and tell you what happened. Maybe you can make more sense of it than I can.”

That answered some of the questions that the Doctor had been wondering about – and raised others. “You say that you scanned the planet,” the Doctor said, gently. “Can I see the results?”

The Hydrax gestured at a nearby panel. “Help yourself.” He unbuckled a small device from his belt. “My master key,” he said. “You may as well use it; I’ve no further need of it.”

“Thank you.” The Doctor unlocked the screen and scrolled through the reports until he found the surface survey these aliens had run. Most of it seemed to be absolutely standard, and nothing to attract such lethal interest – and then he saw it.

One percent deposits of taranium.

And it all made sense.

“Well,” he said, slowly, “if it’s any consolation to you at all, you were killed merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and by a species that never needed an excuse to exterminate anyone – the Daleks.”

“Nasty beggars, eh?” The captain coughed again.

“The worst. I’ve encountered them far too often. They exist simply to hate.”

The Hydrax laughed. “Well, I’m glad it wasn’t anything we did to inadvertently annoy them. We had all sorts of theories, from breaking local taboos to accidentally carrying lethal diseases that wiped out the native population. Nice to see we were just wrong, as usual.”

“You would have annoyed them simply by existing,” the Doctor said. He considered the matter. “You say one of their ships is still stuck in the side of this vessel?”

“Fourteen decks downs, over that direction.” The captain gestured. “You’ve got an interest in wrecked spaceships? What are you, a scrap merchant?”

“No, though I do seem to get into plenty of scraps.” He gave the captain a smile. “I’ll just pop down and see if there’s any record of where they’re transporting that taranium…”

“Valuable, is it?”

“Only if you’re building time machines,” the Doctor said, slowly. “It’s extremely rare, but this planet was loaded with it, relatively speaking. That means the Daleks have several tons of it, once it’s refined.” He gave the alien a sympathetic glance. “You and your companions were killed by taranium poisoning; I should have recognized the effects earlier. Exposure causes disruptions in small pockets of time. You age rapidly, die and decay.” He gestured around the ship. “It also caused the structural decay. It explains the holes in the metal walls, the structural collapse, the stench of burnt time… Now the taranium is gone, it won’t get any worse, but I’m afraid there are no cures for the effects. Even knowing what caused it, I am unable to help you, I’m afraid.”

“That’s okay,” the captain said. “I was resigned to dying anyway. I’d be disappointed if I were saved at the last second.” He coughed again, long and hard this time. He didn’t have long left now…

“You’re a brave man, captain,” the Doctor said, sincerely. “I am very glad to have known you.”

"And I you, my friend," the Hydrax said. He gestured at the key the Doctor still held. "That will get you past all of the security stations." He managed a slight grin, all tusks. "Am I right in assuming that you intend to do something about these Daleks?"

"Very right."

"Good. Make sure my people didn't die in vain, eh?" He started coughing again, this time clearly racked with pain.

And then it stopped.

For a moment, the captain's body slumped forward, and then it simply imploded, to end as a handful of dust.

The Doctor had seen far too many deaths in his lives. He tried to tell himself that this was just one more, a being he'd known for barely half an hour, one that he couldn't possibly grieve over. But he was lying, and he knew it. This victim had been the last member of a band of brave survivors who had wished nothing more than to make a new life for themselves – until the Daleks had annihilated them simply for being in their way. It was one more tally that the Daleks would have to pay for in a list that was already far too long…

Still, standing around moping wouldn't get things done, would it? He had another long walk ahead of him.

Using the captain's electronic key, he made his way across the ship. Now that he knew what he was looking at, he could see the effects of the taranium radiation everywhere. The patches of decay, the stink of ruined time – all spoke of the effects of that thankfully rare material. Using less than a pound of the material, the Daleks had once built a Time Destructor that had threatened entire solar systems – and now they had several tons of taranium. Knowing the evil minds of the Daleks, they undoubtedly had plans to utilize it in a way that would spell hell for the other sentient species of the universe. If the memory core on the wrecked Dalek ship was still intact, he might be able to discover what they were up to.

And then what? It would be ludicrous, quixotic and quite, quite mad for him to even *think* of stopping the Daleks with that sort of power at their disposal. Naturally, that was precisely what he had in mind.

He trod carefully, avoiding the worst holes and time whirls, and finally reached the section of the generational starship that had collided with the Dalek transport. The outer shell was breached over at least three levels, and the Dalek vessel, warped and damaged, stuck into the Hydrax ship at a jaunty angle. The ship had then sealed itself around the breach – the Doctor raised an eyebrow at the efficiency of the seal – so that no atmosphere was being lost to space. The portion of the Dalek ship sticking out from the wall looked like some surreal piece of artwork. The Doctor scrambled into the Dalek ship carefully. As soon as he was within, the ship's artificial gravity changed, and he could stand vertically to the deck of the craft.

It was a pretty standard Dalek transport, and he'd been aboard enough of these to know that the control deck was at the bow, a couple of decks up. The Daleks didn't use stairs, either, for obvious reasons, so it was back to climbing ramps.

The taranium radiation had affected the Dalek ship even more badly than the Hydrax ship. The collision had obviously broken down the containment fields about the material and allowed the leakage. There were holes of all sizes everywhere, where portions of the ship had decayed. Wiring was exposed and sparked from time to time. He came across a Dalek shell that had been peppered with radiation. Chunks of it were missing, and the Dalek creature within was quite dead. He was slightly ashamed of himself for hoping its death had been painful.

Then he reached the flight deck. Power was still on, but at a low level of lighting. The ship was clearly trying to preserve as much as it could. For all of their flaws, the Daleks were superb scientists, and their ships were beauties of design. Even without a Dalek at the controls, it would attempt to continue its mission. And it would fight back against any intruders – like himself – who attempted to access its memory cores.

There were three Daleks on the flight deck, all in various stages of damage, much like the one he had passed on the way here. He ignored them and crossed to the central processing unit. At first glance, it appeared to be unharmed by the radiation, with no obvious damage. Of course, there could be internal problems. And it was always possible that he couldn't break the Dalek coding.

There was a whine of servos, and the Doctor turned slowly around to look back at the three Daleks.

One of them still had power – and a measure of life. The eye-stick groaned upward until it was looking directly at the Doctor.

"You are the Doc-tor," the mechanical voice stated, coldly. "You are an enemy of the Daleks. You are to be exterminated on sight." The gun-stick wobbled slightly as it rose to cover him.

Illustration by Jon Wesley Huff

"Nothing wrong with your recognition programming," the Doctor said, cheerfully. "Yes, I'm the Doctor and – oh, yes! – I'm the enemy of the Daleks. But you haven't exterminated me, have you? From the look of things, you don't have the power levels left to do that." He pointed to the gun-stick. "If you try and fire that thing, you're more likely to completely drain whatever reserves are keeping you alive than to kill me." He wasn't *entirely* sure on this last point, but it seemed to be a good bet. Probably.

"You are to be exterminated," the Dalek repeated.

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you?" the Doctor asked.

The Dalek finally fired.

And died. Its gun had barely lit up. The Doctor released the breath he'd been holding. He *had* taken a slight risk, but, as usual, his instincts were sound. The taranium radiation had pretty much killed the Dalek, and it had been holding onto life tenuously. And, true to its nature, it had elected to attempt murder rather than self-preservation. He eyed the other two Daleks, but they appeared to be quite dead.

Back to the computer, then. As he'd expected, it took him a while to break the coding – just over two hours, in fact – but eventually the machine laid open its files to his probing eyes. As he had suspected, the Daleks had learned of this world with the rare deposits of taranium. Needing it for their time craft, they had sent in a team to extract it. The poor Hydrax had arrived between the initial Dalek survey and the extraction team, and had promptly been exterminated. The Daleks had mined the material and then were ordered to transport it to a refinery for processing into its usable form. There was enough of the crude ore to power thousands of time ships, which the Daleks were currently building. Their target was…

The Doctor stopped and stared at the coordinates on the screen. Every novice Time Lord knew those coordinates; they were the first thing they learned in Temporal Engineering. The Zero Coordinates. The ones that would return any capsule back to base.

The home coordinates of Gallifrey…

Somehow, the Daleks had located the home of the Time Lords and were now planning a massive, sudden strike. Perhaps the Transduction Barriers would be strong enough to withstand such an assault, but the Doctor strongly doubted it. If the Daleks knew the coordinates of Gallifrey, then they must know of the Transduction Barriers. And they probably had a plan for breaking through them somehow. Crude force had always been the Dalek weapon of choice.

It was imperative that the Doctor contact Gallifrey immediately and let them know what was happening. The Time Lords had to be warned that they were about to be invaded. Preparations must be made… He turned to the communications panel in the Dalek ship, but even a cursory glance told him that it had been too badly ravaged by the taranium leakage to be usable. Besides, taranium radiation had a strong effect on all communications. The time-warping effects of the ore tended to interfere strongly with any unshielded radios. That meant that the communications array of the Hydrax ship was also likely to be

ineffective. Even the telepathic circuits in the TARDIS probably couldn't penetrate the radiation effects. His only option was to take off in the TARDIS. Once away from this system, he could send a message easily enough.

He started back to the Ship, half-running, half-walking. His hearts were pounding by the time he reached the TARDIS, still where he had left the old girl. For a second, something seemed different, but he couldn't quite place it. He removed the key from around his neck and inserted it—

It slid away from the lock. Puzzled, he tried again. Again, the key refused to enter the lock, instead slipping away. What could possibly be happening? He tried a third time, more slowly. As soon as the key got within two inches of the lock, he could feel a tug of force diverting it away. He pulled the key back and tried again, with the same result.

He was somehow locked out of the TARDIS… He bent down to get a good look at the lock, but it appeared to be perfectly normal.

Except that he couldn't gain access to it.

There was the sound of suppressed sniggering from behind him, and he whirled around. A dumpy little figure was watching him from the doorway, giggling around a hand he held over his mouth. The other hand held a compact blaster, covering the Doctor carefully. The man was dressed in a rather grubby monk's robe, tied very roughly at the waist with a thick piece of string. Instead of sandals, though, he wore combat boots.

"Oh, Doctor," he said. "You've no idea how much I've been looking forward to this little reunion." His face creased in mock concern. "Having a spot of bother with the lock, are you?" He burst into giggles again.

It had been a very long time since the Doctor had last seen this annoying person, but he was quite impossible to forget. "Monk," he growled, "this is the worst possible time for you to be playing your silly games."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no!" the Monk protested. "This is the best time – the very best!" He gestured around with the blaster he held. "This ship has plenty of air, and there's lots of food in the lockers. I'm sure you'll be able to live here for… oh, about as long as you stranded me on that ice planet!"

"That was a rather long time ago," the Doctor murmured. "Are you still holding a grudge for *that*? I didn't think you were that petty."

The Monk glared at the Doctor. "That was rather a despicable trick, but I forgive you for it. At least, I *will* forgive you for it when I come back and unfreeze your TARDIS lock." He had a dreamy look in his eyes. "Of course, I've no idea how long that will be. But you'll have lots of time to wonder how long it is until my natural magnanimous nature returns and I set you free again. Bye!"

Of all the times for this poor clown to pick to try and pay back his grudge…! "Monk, listen to me," the Doctor said urgently. "You can't do this to me right now – I *have* to be able to leave here."

"Worried about the Daleks returning, are you?" the Monk asked. "Don't be, old boy – they've got what they wanted and left. They won't return to this backend of nowhere for centuries, at the very least. You'll be on you own – all alone – here." He giggled again. "So long."

"I'm not worried about the Daleks," the Doctor snapped. "They have what they wanted – taranium – and they've left. Taranium, Monk – and you know what they use that for."

The Monk did indeed; he'd been forced to partner with the Daleks once, as they chased after the Doctor together… "So?" he said. "It's nothing to do with me. I'm not tangling with those mechanical pepper-pots again. I've learned my lesson, yes indeedy. *Au revoir*."

"Monk, they also have the coordinates to Gallifrey."

The Monk paused and looked back at the Doctor. "You're lying. There's no way they could have them. Not even that nitwit the Master would let them slip." He didn't sound quite so sure, though.

"I don't know how they found them, but I read them in the Daleks' memory banks. Add together the coordinates and taranium…"

The Monk was a bit of a buffoon, but he had a sharp enough mind when he wanted to use it. "They can't possibly be planning…" he said, slowly.

"It's the *Daleks*," the Doctor said, gently. "You of all people know what they're like. Of course they can be planning an invasion of Time itself. It suits their over-inflated opinions of themselves – to be the very masters of time and space, to be able to wipe whole races from existence… You *know* they would leap at the chance."

The Monk considered the problem for a minute. "The taranium radiation *would* explain the problems I had with my TARDIS," he muttered. Then he brightened up: "All right, Doctor, I promise you that I'll contact the Time Lords and warn them just as soon as I leave here. So, stop stopping me, and I'll pop off and do just that. *Arrivederci!*"

"No offense, but do you think they'll take your word for *anything*?" the Doctor asked him. "You're not exactly popular with the Time Lords since you trapped Borusa in a ten-second time loop during his lecture on ethics…"

The Monk grinned happily at the memory. "Well, he always was such a pompous old boor. Constantly repeating the same warnings against interfering, over and over. It was so much fun making him do it *literally* over and over…" He smiled, dreamily. "Five hundred and forty-eight times before they freed him. But you may have a point."

"And just *look* at you," the Doctor added. "Do you ever even wash that robe?"

"No need to," the Monk said brightly. "My own invention – a self-cleaning compound. Dirt just slides right off it."

"I have news for you – it doesn't," the Doctor informed him. "You've got gravy and ketchup stains all over it."

"Well, there may be one or two wrinkles in the formula…"

"And in the robe." The Doctor stared at him solemnly. "Look, I know you've no real love for the Time Lords – but you don't have any real hatred for them, either." The Doctor pressed home his point. The Monk was childish, petty and annoying – but not actually *bad*. "You wouldn't want them to be wiped out if there was something you could do to stop it would you?"

"No…" the Monk agreed, thoughtfully. "They're stuffy and have absolutely no sense of humour, but… no, I wouldn't want them to be wiped out." He sighed. "I've a strong feeling I'm not going to like this next bit at all."

"Let me go, Monk. With two of us carrying the same message, we've a better chance of getting through. And they're more likely to take my word for the danger they're in than yours."

"That's true – you're not as notorious for pulling their legs, are you?" The Monk sighed again, deeply. "But… let you go?"

"It's the only answer."

"But I've *won*!" the Monk protested. "I've caught you, and you can't get out and I've *won*! It's so unfair!" He sat down on a pile of rubble and sulked.

The Doctor sighed inwardly. It was always difficult handling the Monk: he took childish pleasure in his little antics…

The ship shuddered, and there was a distant sound of an explosion. The Doctor grabbed at the wall to steady himself, and the Monk fell over backward with a yelp. There was a second explosion and then a third.

"What's happening?" the Monk squeaked. "Is the ship breaking up? It seemed to be relatively stable when I scanned it. This shouldn't be happening."

"It's not breaking up," the Doctor replied. He had a horrible suspicion that he knew what was happening. "It's being attacked."

"What?" The Monk managed to right himself again, though his blaster was now missing. He seemed to have forgotten all about it. "Who would bother attacking a dead spaceship?"

"Only somebody who knew it wasn't *completely* dead," the Doctor answered. "How exactly did you know I was here?"

The Monk chuckled, and then yelped as there was another ship-shaking explosion. "Oh, that was rather clever of me," he said. "That time I snuck into your TARDIS, I memorized the core coding; you never know when such things might come in handy, do you? All I had to do then was to align my core with your coding, and – presto, tracked you right down." He scowled. "Of course, it took me a *little* while to remember the exact sequence, which is why I didn't catch up with you sooner."

"A little while? A couple of centuries!"

"Yes, well, I had a lot on my mind, you know. It's not like all I do is chase you around."

The ship shuddered again, and there was a terrible groaning sound. Probably the ship was now breaking up at last. The Doctor sighed. "Oh, you idiot."

"I resent that!" the Monk said, bristling.

"I'm sure you do." He shook his head. "There's only one way you could have aligned your TARDIS core with mine: by switching off the force shield which would have otherwise blocked your signal from getting through."

"Well, of course."

"And without those screens, *anybody* with a time ship of their own could detect your TARDIS."

The Monk frowned. “Yes, I knew that the Time Lords *might* have been able to find me if they were looking, but what were the odds that would happen? I’m not really…” His voice trailed off as he finally got the point. “Oh. The Daleks.”

“Yes, you twit – the Daleks. They see a big, flashing light on their boards showing a Gallifreyan signal right on top of their taranium mine, and they’re bound to investigate, aren’t they?”

The ship shuddered again, and the Doctor started to feel light-headed. No, not light-headed – just light. “The artificial gravity is failing,” he said. “The ship is breaking apart. Unless you’ve learned how to breathe vacuum, Monk, it’s time to let me into my TARDIS.”

The Monk looked at the TARDIS and almost cried. “But I *won*…”

“Yes,” the Doctor said, gently. “You won. You’ve beaten me. Now, be a good sport and unlock the TARDIS for me so we can beat a hasty retreat, will you?”

The Monk nodded and pulled his own TARDIS key from a grubby pocket. He concentrated for a moment, and then tapped the key smartly against the lock.

“Impressive,” the Doctor said. “You realigned the locking mechanism by hooking it to your own TARDIS lock.”

The Monk beamed. “Yes, it was rather clever of me, wasn’t it?”

The Doctor decided not to ruin his rival’s feeling of triumph by pointing out what would have been fairly obvious to anyone who’d paid attention during Celestial Mechanics – that this would have also locked the Monk out of his *own* TARDIS, too. Let him have his tiny moment of feeling superior. The ship groaned and started its final collapse. Gravity died completely, and the Doctor grabbed the TARDIS door handle as he was swept off his feet. The Monk yelped and floated off.

“Hold on,” the Doctor called. “I’ll throw you a line.”

“I *can’t* hold on,” the Monk yelped. “That’s the problem.”

The Doctor opened the small compartment in the TARDIS door that stored the emergency phone. He hoped the cord would be long enough. “Here.” He wrenched the phone out bodily and tossed it in the Monk’s general direction. Air was whistling out of the room now; clearly the hull had been fatally breached. They only had minutes. Fumbling a bit, he managed to finally get his key into the lock and open the door.

This brought the TARDIS’s internal systems into play, and the Ship’s gravity caught him, so he could stand again. He could see that the Monk had managed to grab the telephone and was clutching it to his chest. The Doctor began reeling in the cord, pulling in his plump colleague. The Monk had stopped making any howls and squeals finally, probably because all of the air was now gone.

The generational starship was in the final stages of breaking up. The walls buckled and then tore. Huge slabs went spinning off into space. There was no floor under the TARDIS now, just a gaping hole several hundred feet long. Without gravity, though, the Ship couldn’t fall. Further sections of the room went flying off as the Daleks kept on firing.

Finally, the Monk's feet touched down in the TARDIS's doorway, and he gave a huge howl of relief. "You took your time," he gasped.

"You're welcome." The Doctor pried the telephone out of his grip and replaced it. Then he hurried across to the console and closed the doors. He scanned the readings, worried. The starship was almost entirely gone now, swallowed by Dalek gunfire and the residual taranium effects. What he needed now was…

Ah! *There*. He could read the Monk's TARDIS signature clearly, since the force screens were down. "Hold on!" he called over his shoulder and slammed home the controls. With its usual howling sound, the TARDIS slipped through space.

"Doesn't sound too well," the Monk observed, looking around the room. "Mind you, I have to admit I like the décor – much nicer than you used to keep it."

"I'll send you some swatches," the Doctor muttered, as he navigated carefully. As the starship evaporated around them, he could make out three Dalek attack cruisers, who could finally see their true targets, the two Gallifreyan time craft. The TARDIS shuddered as it was struck by their weapons.

"What are you doing, Doctor?" the Monk asked. "Get us out of here!"

"And leave your TARDIS for the Daleks?" The Doctor shook his head. "No, for three reasons. First, they would probably gain access to it – they're *very* resourceful, as you know. And if they get in, they could find the code to passing the Transduction Barriers in your core. That's assuming they don't already have it, and I daren't take that risk. Secondly, if we both go separate ways, we'll have a better chance of warning Gallifrey."

"Makes sense," the Monk agreed, holding onto the console for stability as the TARDIS shook again. "What's the third reason?"

The Doctor glared at him. "Because if I were to spend much longer with you, I'd probably strangle you, you nitwit." He adjusted the settings carefully, and then slipped his TARDIS gently inside the Monk's. "Right, here we are – out!" He opened the doors again. The Monk's TARDIS shook as the Daleks now targeted that as well. "You'd better hurry. According to my instruments, whatever the Daleks are using, it's actually denting the TARDIS's force fields. They really are inventive little monsters."

The Monk gave a vague salute. "Right, Doctor. See you soon!" he rushed out, and the Doctor closed the doors firmly behind him. "Not if I can help it," he muttered. Then he remembered something and switched on the external speakers. "Don't forget to unalign our cores and turn the force shields back on!" Then he sent the TARDIS spinning off into the Vortex, leaving the Daleks and the Monk far, far behind. He breathed a great sigh of relief.

Now it was time to contact the Time Lords and warn them that Armageddon was about to descend…

Visitor From Space!

by J.R. Loflin

"Not so fast, Zebulon!"

"Johnny Astro! I should have known. My dear boy, you have arrived just in time to witness my plan come to fruition. Once I throw this lever, the inhabitants of the planet Minerva will become my mindless slaves. It's such a pity your precious Captain isn't here to see my triumph!"

Zebulon's hand gripped the lever and began to pull downwards, but was interrupted by the sharp sting of a stun-gun.

"Don't be so sure about that, you fiend!"

"Captain Roger Hunter?! But you're dead – I killed you myself!" Zebulon's face turned red with outrage.

"That little deathtrap you left for me? Don't be ridiculous, Zeb, I'll always be around to fight the forces of evil and defeat them. Now put your hands up – you're under arrest!"

"Bah! You may have beaten me this time, but I'll be back. I'll always come back! Not even death itself can stop me!"

"There's an idea." Johnny looked hopefully at his mentor. "If we kill him, he can't hurt anyone else!"

Captain Hunter's frown gave away his answer before he could speak.

"Johnny, violence and murder never solve anything. Sure, we have to fight for what's right, but that's only as a last resort. If we were to intentionally kill a living being, we'd be no better off than this scoundrel here. No, we're not judges, juries or executioners, we're just sworn to uphold the law and protect the innocent. That's what the Galactic Patrol is all about."

"Gosh, you're right, Captain! I never thought of it like that!"

"It's okay, Johnny, you're young – you've still got a lot to learn. Now, let's get this crook where he belongs – behind bars!"

Join us next Saturday for another thrilling adventure with Captain Roger Hunter of the Galactic Patrol Agency as he takes on the Sinister Sinestrals in a brand new adventure serial, brought to you by Goode's Antibacterial Soap.

Jed rolled over for what must have been the fourteenth time since he'd went to bed. His mind raced with the exploits of Captain Roger Hunter, Galactic Patrol Agent. His Pa had told him not to stay up late to listen to that silly program on the radio, but Jed couldn't help himself. Despite his Pa's insistence that there "weren't no such things as bug-eyed monsters," Jed saw them every time he closed his eyes. Though his father would have sworn otherwise, Jed wasn't afraid of the creatures. He just wanted to meet them.

Throwing back the thinning covers, Jed hopped out of bed. Sleep wouldn't be coming for a long time yet, he decided; no point in just lying there awake. He wandered over to the window and eased the old wooden frame up inch by inch until it was wide enough for him to crawl through. Cautiously, he extended one

leg out of the opening and pulled himself slowly through. Jed had to be careful not to rattle the panes of glass that hung loosely in the frame. The last thing he needed was a whipping from his Pa for being up past his bedtime.

Crickets chirped as Jed sat down for a better look at the night sky. He couldn't stargaze while standing: it always made him feel as if he were falling from a great height. Leaning back, he watched them twinkle in the heavens, wondering idly if he'd ever get to see them up close. He wanted to, more than anything. His Pa wanted him to be a farmer, to continue the tradition laid down by his father and grandfather. All Jed wanted was to go on an adventure with his friends.

Not that he had any friends, Jed reflected, as he reached over and plucked a blade of grass to chew on. He'd never gotten along with anyone at school. There were no fights to speak of, but the other children in his class gave him a wide berth. Most of them lived in the city and thought him strange for living on a farm. He suspected they thought he was a dumb country boy, but Jed fed his mind with a steady stream of books – all kinds of stories of knights, pirates, cowboys and spacemen. The spacemen were his favourite. He hoped that one day it would be him out there, meeting people and creatures from other worlds, exploring and having fun. If only he could get off of the farm.

A streak of light darted across the night sky and Jed's eyes widened. A shooting star? No, he thought, as he followed the trail with his eyes; it looked like something was coming down to Earth! Leaping to his feet, he took off running towards the falling light, all thoughts of his dreary farm life forgotten.

Tendrils of smoke crept through Myers' Woods, leaving Jed an easy enough trail to follow. Even without them, the smell of burning wood wafted over the trees and rocks, enticing the eager young boy closer to his goal. He emerged into an area thick with smoke and littered with large fragments of metal, broken branches and tree trunks.

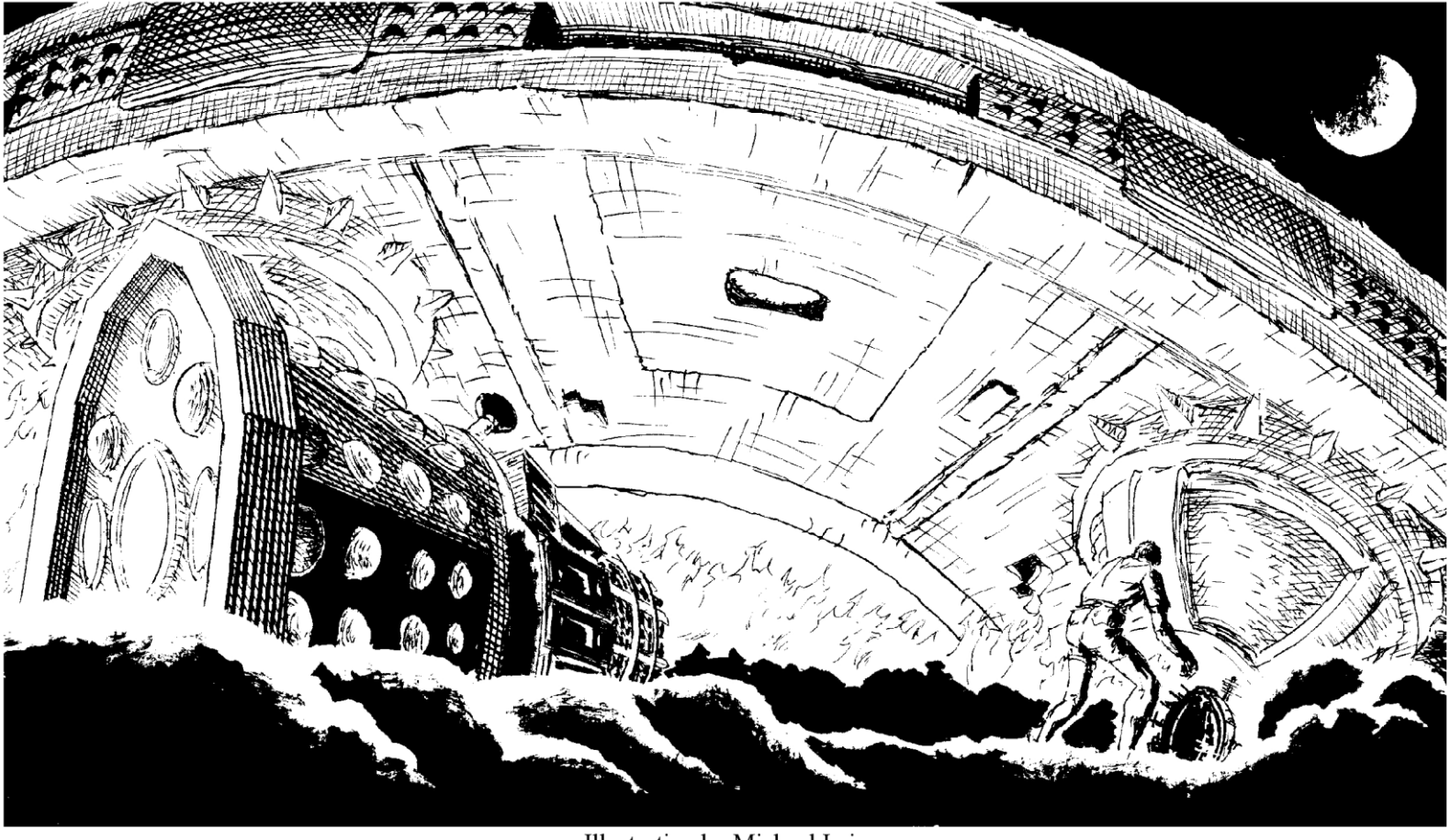

Illustration by Michael Leis

A spaceship! Or what was left of one, at any rate. Most of the hull was intact, but chunks of it had torn off during the descent and impact. The craft had once been saucer-like, just like the ones in the *Journey Into Space* comics he kept under his mattress at home. But if there was a ship, where were the occupants?

Lying not far from the edge of the makeshift clearing was an odd cylindrical shape, roughly five feet in length. A series of spheres ran about half the length of the object, with a mangled grill plating at the end and what resembled a broken toilet plunger hanging limply out of one of a pair of sockets just below it. Debris led away from the open end towards a dome-shaped lid with two shattered light bulbs on either side and the stump of a torn-off stalk in the center. Perhaps it was a landing craft for really tiny people, Jed pondered.

His assumption proved to be mistaken a moment later as an olive green appendage shakily emerged from the broken object. Inching forward, dragging itself out of the remains of its container, the tentacle and the blob-like thing to which it belonged crawled towards Jed, edging closer and closer. Jed stood his ground, unafraid of the alien. He wanted very much to see what it would do next.

The answer disappointed him when, a moment later, the creature collapsed, its tentacles falling lifelessly to the ground. Jed didn't hesitate; he rushed to the creature's side. Reaching out, his fingers touched its leathery skin, tracing a pattern across it to where an open wound was oozing a thick green substance which Jed guessed must be the alien's blood. Whatever this thing was, it was clear to Jed that it needed help.

Not here, Jed decided. The smoke had gotten worse, and flames were now licking the surface of the crashed saucer. It wasn't safe to remain much longer, which made Jed's decision that much easier. He'd just have to take the injured alien with him back to his Pa's farm. Scooping the creature up and laying it as gently as possible over his shoulder, he turned and headed for home. Intent on getting his new acquaintance to safety, Jed failed to notice one of the creature's tentacles reach up and weakly curl around his neck, emitting a soft green glow overshadowed by the flickering red and orange of the growing fire behind them.

Morning came, and as usual, Jed didn't hear his Pa get up in the early hours preceding the dawn. Panic gripped him. What if his Pa had found the creature? He raced out of his bedroom and out of the farmhouse, fearing the worst.

Outwardly, the barn looked just as he had left it the night before. That's right, Jed remembered, his Pa had planned on leaving early to visit his brother in Missouri and help harvest his crop of corn. He'd be gone for about a week and had told Jed that he was in charge of looking after things on the farm until he returned, promising that their neighbours, the Popes, would look in on him from time to time to make sure he was behaving himself. Having no further need for stealth, Jed relaxed and entered the barn to check on the injured creature.

He found it near the back of the building, in the next-to-last stall on the left.

The stalls themselves were empty these days, not having seen actual livestock since Jed's Grandpa was alive. Still, the place served as a great storage area for hay and various farming implements and tools. Now, Jed supposed, alien life forms could be added to that list.

The creature was asleep, as far as Jed could tell. It hadn't moved from the spot where Jed had made a makeshift bed of soft hay for the creature to rest upon. The wound was partially healed, Jed noted. The blood had dried up, and apart from a small scab, there was barely any indication of an injury. Whatever this little guy was, he sure could take his lumps.

Jed moved to touch the creature, but its tentacles stretched, almost as if the thing was yawning. He snapped his fingers back in surprise.

"Where am I?" a voice echoed inside Jed's head.

Jed, for all his experience with the unknown via the comics and radio shows he'd followed for most of his life, was totally unprepared for the feeling of someone speaking to him telepathically. He looked around in search of a source for the slippery mental voice.

"Wha—?"

"Where am I?" the voice repeated. This time, Jed could feel the voice pulling his attention to the green blob before him. As far as he knew, the creature had no mouth, and yet it was talking to him.

"Y-you're in my Pa's barn."

"I do not recognize this planet, Pa's Barn."

"Oh! You're on Earth. It's the planet where I live. Your spaceship crashed here. Don't you remember?"

"I recall nothing."

"You mean, you don't remember coming here?"

"No."

"Well, what about your name? You gotta remember your name, don't you?"

"I do not have a name."

Jed frowned. In all of the daydreams he'd ever had about meeting aliens from outer space, he had never imagined such a meeting would go quite like this.

"Everybody's gotta have a name! I'll call you Roger."

"Roger? What is a Roger?"

"He's a Galactic Patrol Agent."

"We are Galactic Patrol Agents?"

"No, silly! Galactic Patrol Agents aren't real, it's just a radio show!" Jed laughed.

"Radio show?"

"Don't worry about that, it's not important. My name is Jed. I found you in the woods."

"You said that I had a ship?" Roger's blobby mass vibrated inquisitively.

"'Had' is right. It was torn all to pieces. I can show you if you want," Jed offered.

"Show me."

Jed moved to pick up Roger, but Roger waved him away with a tentacle.

"Show me! Move. Move!" Roger demanded.

Jed shrugged and motioned for Roger to follow him.

Most of Roger's ship, indeed, most of the area immediately surrounding the crash site was scorched away, leaving only charred ruins of trees – bent, broken and burned by the fire from the heated entry of the ship into the Earth's atmosphere. The entirety of Myers' Woods might have burnt to the ground if not for the thunderstorm that had come through in the hours after Jed's impromptu rescue mission. Instead, the blaze had been contained and extinguished early on, leaving only a small area affected.

Roger did not seem to mind the muddy earth he now rested upon. Perhaps, Jed mused, his race was used to muck such as this. Truthfully, there was no telling what sort of world the creature came from. If Roger could not regain his memory, perhaps they would never know at all.

While Jed was pondering Roger's origins, Roger was sifting through the charred remains of his escape capsule, now little more than an open-ended lump of metal. Burnt and fused wires dangled from the opening. Roger extended a tentacle towards them and slid it along the discoloured wires.

"Do you recognize anything?" Jed asked hopefully.

"Negative." Roger's voice was faint inside Jed's head. His newfound friend's attention was elsewhere, trying to recall something, anything, that would give him a clue as to where he came from, to who he was. Jed couldn't imagine not knowing his Pa or the farm or the Earth.

"Maybe you'll think of something later," Jed tried to encourage him.

Roger crawled into the burned-out shell that had once housed him. Jed wasn't certain why; it wasn't as if there was much of anything left of the capsule.

"I came from here?" Roger asked.

"Yep, you were inside it. Is it your ship?"

"No," Roger answered after a bit, "it is too small. I would require a greater range of movement."

"A lifeboat then?"

"Lifeboat?"

"Yeah, you know, an escape pod. Boats have them to help the crew get away if something happens to the ship."

"Negative. The size of this device is not suitable for an escape pod."

"Well, that's something, I guess."

"Explain."

"You don't know what it is, but you know what it ain't. That means you do know something, right?"

"Your logic is sound," Roger admitted.

"Maybe it's like a car. You drive it around?"

"A travel machine?" Roger considered the possibility.

"Sure." Jed's face lit up. "You can fit in it, so maybe you rode around in it. I don't know what your home planet is like, but it can't be easy getting around on

those short tentacles of yours!"

"Correct. It has been difficult for me to traverse this terrain. Such a device would be more efficient."

"It's just too bad the thing is busted now. It must be rough being stuck on a strange new world with no way to get around good."

"I cannot leave. My ship and my travel machine have been destroyed. I am stranded here," Roger sulked.

"Aw, don't be sad! You could live with me on the farm! Pa wouldn't mind, so long as we don't tell him, that is."

"Pa? What is Pa?"

"He's… well, he's Pa! I'm his son, and he's my Pa! Don't you have a Pa?"

"I… do not know."

"Sure you do, you've just forgotten, that's all. But we'll get your memory back." Jed patted Roger gently.

"How?"

"I ain't sure." Jed frowned. Dealing with aliens was going to be a lot harder than he thought.

In the days that followed, Roger's faulty memory was set aside as Jed introduced him to the intricacies of life on Earth.

Fishing had been a mistake. While Roger could wield a rod well enough, he couldn't put enough weight into anchoring his position and, on more than one occasion that day, found himself having to be fished out of the river by Jed, who would dive in to rescue him whenever one of the larger trout tugged too hard on Roger's line.

For every failure at manual labour, Roger had a resounding success when it came to other tasks. He had a surprising aptitude for playing games. He quickly learned the rules of checkers and managed to trounce Jed from the third game onwards. What he truly loved, however, was playing with army men.

It had begun quite simply. Jed had brought out his men from their storage space in a rusty old bucket in his closet.

"Hey, Roger?"

"Yes, Jed?"

"Do you wanna play War?"

"War?"

"Yeah, you know, army men. Good guys and bad guys trying to kill each other?"

"I would like to play War!"

Jed grinned and started picking figures out of the bucket and distributing them between the two of them.

"Okay, you can be the green guys because you're green, and I'll be these tan ones. Now, I'm the good guys, and you're the bad guys, got it?"

"Why am I bad?"

"Well, somebody's gotta be bad or there wouldn't be anyone for the good guys to fight," Jed explained.

"I will be the bad guys!"

"That's the spirit!"

The pair set up their plastic figures. Jed arranged his in neat lines that would have made a Roman general beam with pride at his efforts. Roger, on the other hand, was more meticulous, taking great pains to hide his men behind old socks, chair legs, or other toys that had been abandoned on the makeshift battlefield of the bedroom floor.

"Prepare for battle!" Jed yelled.

"I am ready!" Roger's body quivered with excitement.

Play began. Jed shot at one of Roger's men who weren't quite as well concealed as the others. Roger let out a shocked cry of anguish as Jed tipped his soldier over.

"You will pay for that!" Roger's blob-like form trembled with rage before selecting one of his sharpshooters to take out three of Jed's exposed troops in quick succession.

"No fair! That third guy was out of range!"

"Incorrect! The effective range of the Lee-Enfield Mark Three Sniper variant is approximately two thousand feet. Given the scale of the figures, my sniper unit was well within established parameters!"

"No way did he do that!"

"He could not have missed! Green guys are the superior soldiers! Your tan soldiers are inferior and have just been exterminated! EXTERMINATED!" Roger began to flail his tentacles wildly.

Jed rolled his eyes. "Fine, you win. I'm tired of playing anyway."

"You acknowledge defeat?"

"I guess so. It's almost time for supper anyway. Are you sure you don't want to eat anything?"

"I do not eat food."

"Right." Jed started clearing away the toys, replacing them in the bucket. He looked at Roger, who seemed to be happy enough in his victory, but not hungry. Never hungry. Everybody had to eat, thought Jed, even aliens. So what did Roger eat? More importantly, how much longer could he go before needing to find something to sustain him?

The next day, the pair stood in the yard behind Jed's farmhouse while the boy explained the rules of another game to his alien friend.

"Okay, here's how we play. I'm going to close my eyes and count to one hundred. You go and find a place to hide. You can hide anywhere, just so long as you stay on the farm. Got it?"

"I am to hide. It is your job to seek and locate me. I will obey!"

"Yep! Okay, here goes nothing. One, two, three…" Jed covered his eyes and began counting. He heard Roger scuttling away, but resisted the temptation to peek and see which way he was leaving.

"…ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred! Ready or not, here I come!"

Jed searched the farmhouse first. He went from room to room, checking

under the couch, under the bed, anywhere he thought Roger might hide. He even checked a few places he wasn't even sure Roger was capable of reaching, just on the off-chance that he had managed to climb up to the kitchen cabinets, for example.

Once the farmhouse had been cleared, Jed spread his search to the yard. There was a large dead oak tree with a couple of holes that might have concealed his friend, but he wasn't there either.

He had just started towards the tractor shed when he heard a loud bark coming from the direction of the barn. Uh-oh, Jed thought, that sounds like Old Man Jenkins' dog, Lucy. She had a bad habit of wandering off the Jenkins' property and sniffing around his Pa's farm. Lucy must have discovered Roger.

Jed made for the barn as quickly as possible. As he ran, he could hear Lucy's barking get louder and angrier. When he was about halfway, the barking became muffled and after a moment or two, stopped altogether.

Jed dashed through the open door and came to a halt when he saw Lucy. The dog was lying still and didn't appear to be breathing. One of Roger's tentacles was uncurling from around the dog's throat.

"Roger! Oh Roger, you didn't…" Jed's eyes swelled with tears as he sank to his knees in front of Lucy.

"The threat has been neutralized!" Roger beamed proudly.

"She was just a dog! She didn't know any better!"

"The life form was aggressive. It wanted to exterminate me."

"That's no excuse! You didn't have to kill her! Galactic Patrol Agents don't kill, we never kill! It's wrong to kill!"

"We aren't Galactic Patrol Agents; Galactic Patrol Agents are not real," Roger protested.

"Never! Don't kill, not ever!"

Roger extended a tentacle and touched the tears rolling down Jed's cheek.

"I obey…" the voice in Jed's head sounded truly sorry for what it had done.

"Okay." Jed sniffed, picking up Lucy's limp body.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna go bury Lucy. You stay here. Don't get into any more trouble while I'm gone. Whatever you do, don't kill anything else. Not now, not ever!"

"I obey!"

Roger watched as Jed carried Lucy's body out of the barn and then sank back into the pile of hay in which he'd been hiding.

The following morning, Jed headed into town with his wagon and some money from his Pa's old coffee can. His Pa's farm was about ten miles in the country, and since Jed was too young to drive, he had to walk the entire way. Although he hated to leave Roger for that long without supervision, he didn't see any other option. Roger may not have required food, but Jed didn't have that luxury. Since he didn't live on a farm with any livestock, a trip to the general store for some groceries was unavoidable.

Mr. Jarrett called out to Jed as he entered the store. Jed normally waved to

the kindly, balding old man, but his mind was preoccupied with the events of the past few days, and so offered him only a weak smile in response. He filled his wagon absent-mindedly and in somewhat of a hurry. He'd already left Roger alone too long already, and didn't want to prolong his shopping trip any longer than absolutely necessary.

"Pretty cool weather we've been having," Mr. Jarrett tried striking up a conversation with the boy.

"I guess so."

"Looks like it might rain," he tried again as he began ringing up the boy's items on the cash register.

"Yeah, maybe. Um, can you hurry up, Mr. Jarrett? I need to get back to the farm."

"Oh yeah, that's right, you're looking after your Pa's place while he's out of town. Big responsibility for a young man."

"Yessir." Jed nodded. Mr. Jarrett had no idea just how big, the boy thought.

"Well, that'll be twelve dollars and eighty-three cents."

Jed handed him the correct amount and left the store with a half-hearted goodbye.

The young farmboy was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he didn't see the old man coming until it was too late. The man, similarly preoccupied with some sort of handheld device, also failed to notice Jed. The two collided, and Jed found himself sitting on the sidewalk, looking up at the gruff stranger before him.

The man looked like a disgruntled Santa Claus that had gone on a diet, been kicked out of the North Pole, and left to wander the Earth in penance for displeasing the good children of the world. His face was wrinkled, his greyish-white hair standing on end, and he was dressed head-to-toe in rough leather clothes with unidentifiable stains accentuating the look. If it weren't for the expensive-looking piece of hardware he'd been carrying, Jed would have thought him a hobo.

"I'm sorry, mister, I didn't see you there," Jed apologized as he rose to his feet and dusted himself off.

The stranger, startled by Jed's voice, finally appeared to notice the boy. When he did, his eyes darted back to the device he was holding, then back to the boy. His eyes widened in alarm.

"It's you!" he said, bewildered.

"Me, sir?"

"No, can't be you." The stranger frowned and shook his head. "You're human. You *are* human, aren't you, boy?"

"The last time I checked," Jed answered warily. He didn't like where this was going. Maybe he was from the government, come to take Roger away from him. Though, he didn't much look like he worked for the government, not in that get-up.

"Yes, well, be that as it may, I think you and I should have a word. I'm getting strange readings from you. You haven't held any radioactive material lately, have you?"

Jed's eyes bulged in alarm and he shook his head emphatically.

"I shouldn't have thought so. Still, can't be too careful. Not with the War on."

"War's over, sir," Jed protested. "Been over for over a year now. They signed a treaty and everything."

"Not the Korean War, boy, the Time War."

"The Time War?"

"Yes, it's still very much going on, I'm afraid. Mind you, that's the trouble with a temporal conflict: there's always a war on somewhere."

"I-I think I'd better go." Jed started backing away from the old man very slowly.

"Look, it's all right." The old man smiled. "I'm not going to harm you, I only want—"

Jed didn't stay to hear what the strange old man had to say. He turned and fled for home, as fast as he could, leaving his wagon full of food and supplies behind.

The old man smiled wistfully and took hold of the wagon handle. He had a feeling he had a very long walk ahead of him.

"Roger?"

Jed peeked into the barn, looking for his friend. He had forgiven Roger that morning before he left, but he wondered whether or not the alien would still be upset about their argument. He didn't really know if Roger was the type to hold a grudge or not. When it came right down to it, thought Jed, he didn't really know a lot of things about his new friend.

"I am here!" Roger slung himself from the barn loft, landing on Jed's head. The two sank to the ground, Roger tickling Jed with his tentacles. Jed laughed. Clearly, Roger was not the type to hold a grudge after all.

Jed told him about the strange man he met in town and what he had told Jed about a Time War. None of the news seemed to faze Roger very much. Maybe the man wasn't after Roger at all. Maybe it was just a strange coincidence.

A shadow fell across the floor of the barn, shading the pair of them.

"There you are!"

Silhouetted by the late afternoon sunlight, the old man from town stood in the doorway of the barn.

"I *knew* you'd been in contact with it! The instruments were right."

"W-what do you want?"

"As I told you earlier, I don't want to hurt you. I've just come for the Dalek."

"The Dalek?" Jed hugged Roger to his chest.

"Well, Kaled mutant, actually." The old man licked his dry, chapped lips nervously. "What happened to your casing, eh? Destroyed in the crash?"

"Doctor?" Roger's voice echoed in Jed's head once again, only this time it was *louder*, as if Roger was addressing both Jed and the mysterious stranger.

"Ah, you remember me, then?" The old man scratched the back of his head.

“Though, I must say, it’s been many years since I’ve gone by that name.”

“You are the Doctor!”

“Yes, call me the Doctor, if you must.” The Doctor frowned. “Although it’s not going to matter for much longer. I’ve come for you. You’re not going to bother anyone else.”

“No! I won’t let you take him, I won’t! Roger is my friend!” Jed interjected, placing himself between the old man and his intended victim.

“Eh? Roger? Ah, the Kaled. You don’t understand, boy, he’s—”

“My name is Jed and I’m not going to let you hurt my friend!”

“Jed, listen to me, ‘Roger’ here is a Dalek at heart. Daleks are evil creatures that rain down death and destruction everywhere they go. You remember that war I told you about, the Time War? They want to conquer all of time and space; they want to exterminate all other forms of life! They’ve already slaughtered untold billions of lives. I was trying to fight a large number of them, but this one got away.”

“You captured the others?”

“Well, not exactly…”

“You mean you killed them?!”

“I didn’t want to, but they left me no choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” Jed yelled at him. “I thought you said the Daleks were bad, but you killed them. Good guys don’t kill, not ever!”

“Oh my boy, I wish it were that simple. I used to think as you do, and I still do, whenever possible, but sometimes—”

“No, you’re a bad man! I won’t let you kill Roger!”

“Jed?” Roger touched the boy’s mind again.

“What?”

“Galactic Patrol Agents do not kill, not ever. The Doctor was once such an agent.”

“You mean Galactic Patrol Agents are real?”

“Negative, but the Doctor fulfilled their function in reality. I am… I was a ‘bad guy,’ Jed. Before my escape craft crashed here on Earth, I did exterminate many inferior life forms. I no longer wish to exterminate anyone.”

“What rubbish! A reformed Dalek?” The Doctor rolled his eyes.

“It is true, Doctor. I am no longer a pure Dalek. When I had no memory, I touched the boy’s mind. What I saw there altered my nature, even if I did not realize it at first. I wish only to survive.”

“Even if what you say is true, and I’m not saying I believe you, you can’t seriously expect me to leave you here on Earth?”

“Of course he does! He’s my friend – he can live here with me!”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow and started to dissuade the boy, but it was Roger who spoke next.

“Negative!”

“What? But—”

“Jed, I am no longer a Dalek as the Doctor knows the term, but I am still a Kaled. I will require radiation to survive. Despite the growing nuclear threat present between the nations of your world, there would not be enough

radioactivity to sustain me indefinitely, even if a full-scale nuclear conflict were to break out."

"You can't leave me, Roger! You're my only friend!"

"I will always be your friend, but I cannot remain here." Roger placed a tentacle to Jed's cheek. "If the Doctor found me, then other Daleks would be able to do so as well. The only way to preserve your life is for me to leave."

"You're quite right, Jed," the Doctor spoke up. "There's always another way. I'll take him somewhere he can live out the rest of his days in peace, somewhere with lots of radiation for him to live on."

A short time later, Jed, Roger and the Doctor returned to the site of Roger's crash. Ashes now covered the ground and coated the remains of the Dalek spacecraft. They covered everything apart from a strange blue box that had not been there when Roger had crashed and set the woods ablaze.

"What is that?"

"That is my TAR… that, Jed, is my *spacecraft."*

"But it's just a box!"

"A box? Well, I admit she may not look like much, but I personally think it's what is on the inside that counts, wouldn't you agree?"

Jed nodded.

"I just wish Roger didn't have to leave so soon."

"I cannot remain. To delay my departure would only increase the chance of other Daleks locating me here. I would not want them to exterminate you."

Jed swung his foot at a pile of ashes, scattering them.

"Yeah, I don't guess I'd want that either. But I will miss you, Roger!"

"I will miss you as well, Jed, but I must go with the Doctor now."

Tears in his eyes, Jed turned to the Doctor, who had opened the door of the blue box and ushered Roger inside.

"You promise not to kill him?" Jed sniffed.

"Galactic Patrol Agent's honour!" The Doctor turned, threw Jed a mock salute and winked at him.

Jed grinned as the old man stepped into the blue box and closed the door. As a strange unearthly sound echoed throughout the burned and broken trees, the box and all of the wreckage began to fade slowly away. Jed's mouth dropped open as his eyes glanced upwards and read the words printed above the door: Police Public Call Box. Maybe he had met a real Galactic Patrol Agent after all.

Inertia

by Pete Kempshall

WHITE CITY, 1965

Brian inhaled, holding the smoke deep in his lungs before expelling it. He wondered if the cigarette would do anything at all to mask the smell – the last week had been unseasonably hot, and the inside of the garage would be humming by now.

Only one way to find out. He squared his shoulders, unclasped the padlock and opened the door.

The stench rushed out at him, ripened to a nauseating thickness that adhered to the insides of his nose and throat. Brian's stomach rebelled, and he needed a moment to quell the uprising before he could pull on the cigarette again, exhaling through his nostrils to purge the stink.

Christ, it was bad.

He stepped inside, contemplated closing the door behind him, but decided to take a chance and leave it open. The idea of being locked in with the corrupted air was more than he could stand. Besides, he could use the extra light: what little brightness made its way into the lockup was filtered through windows so grimy they couldn't have been cleaned since the Coronation.

Brian crossed the oil-stained concrete floor to the back wall, steering clear of the tarpaulin and the dark, buzzing cloud that busied itself above it. An uncharacteristic pang of regret twisted in his chest. All the old bloke had to do was take the money, no questions asked, but he'd been wise to Brian from the word go. No sooner had Brian approached him, offered to pay for the use of his garage, than the daft sod had made him for what he was, threatened to call the coppers. Left Brian no choice.

Too bad.

The boxes against the wall were just as Brian had left them. He lifted the topmost one clear and dropped it to the ground. The next box in the pile followed it with the jangling crash of breaking crockery, exposing a tall wooden tea chest. Brian worked his fingernails under the lid and prised it off. The carryall was still inside, and as he tugged it clear, he hefted it, judged its weight. Best guess, all the contents were present and correct.

"Bloody hell, Bri. It flamin' reeks in 'ere."

The figure in the doorway was smaller than Brian, made more imposing by the large-calibre service revolver in his hand.

"Must be a pipe backed up somewhere," Brian said. "Wassa matter, Archie? Couldn't find a proper shooter?"

"Funny. Put the bag down."

Brian lowered the carryall to the ground. "How'd you know where to find me?" Through the filthy windows, he caught sight of movement, someone pacing up and down outside. Archie had brought his mate, the boxer, along. Insurance.

He was going to need it.

"You ain't as clever as you think," Archie replied.

"Clever enough to know when to call it quits."

Archie snorted. "You think Mr. Nero wouldn't notice you creaming off his money?"

Brian fought the compulsion to look down at the bag. Nero had taken over the Business six months ago, and Brian had seen the writing on the wall straight off, started salting cash away.

Twenty thousand quid. More than enough to get clear of the little psycho.

"It's not his, it's ours. Like a payout, for services rendered. We can just go, now, don't even need to pack. Rio, Archie. Right now."

"No, Bri. Mr. Nero's going to see me right. He promised."

"You pillock, Archie," Brian said, his voice pitying. "He'll drag you down with—"

"Shut it!" Archie shouted. Tears welled in his eyes, hard little diamonds of shame. "You don't know nothing—"

"I know I was supposed to look after you," Brian said, edging imperceptibly closer to Archie and the gun. "Like Dad wanted."

"I…"

"Give me the gun, Arch."

"I can't."

"So what, then? You know what Nero'll do, you take me back."

"He don't want you back."

The boom expanded to fill the garage. Suddenly Brian couldn't breathe, as if the sound had forced all the air from the place. He toppled forward, hands locking around Archie's wrist. The still-smoking gun clattered away into the gloom, but now all Brian's attention was on the coldness spreading through him…

He staggered, falling against the boxes, barely feeling them collapse around him, on top of him, burying him.

As darkness closed over him, he heard footsteps, receding. Footsteps and something else.

Crying.

A single, strong gust of wind. Then pain. So much pain.

Brian opened his eyes, screwed them shut again, because what he saw made no sense. He couldn't be dead. Dead wouldn't hurt so much. Delirious then. Hallucinating. Because if he wasn't, someone had come into the garage, ignored him as he lay shot and bleeding to death on the floor… and built a shed.

He pushed himself up to his knees, one hand clasped over the soft wetness of his abdomen. The shed was metal, like the bottom-of-the-garden bomb shelters from when he was a kid, and standing to one side of it was a woman. Younger than him, wearing dark trousers and a loose-fitting, wide-necked sweater, she hovered between the shed and the exit, her back to him.

A man appeared in the doorway, tall in a blazer and pale roll-neck. Squinting into the gloom, he too failed to notice Brian back in the shadows. Grabbing the woman's hand, he pulled her through the door into the bright light beyond.

Brian reached out his free hand, pleading.

Help me.

But they were gone.

A moment later, the shed exploded and smashed him out of existence.

HAMPSTEAD, 1971

Liz smoothed the letter flat and slid it towards the Brigadier.

The expectation was that he would reach for it, at the very least glance at it. Instead he regarded her with the same cool air of amusement she'd grown to find both endearing and frustratingly smug.

"It's from Cambridge," she said. "Notification that my funding is being discontinued. Given my extended absence."

"I see," the Brigadier said. "And you want me to release you back to the university."

"Actually, no," Liz said, deriving no small amount of enjoyment from the sharp raising of an eyebrow she received in response. "I was hoping you would formalize my position here."

She'd been expecting the letter for some time, dreaded its arrival. At the time of her "virtual kidnap" by UNIT, the idea of abandoning her research had been unconscionable, as had the idea of her playing second fiddle to another scientist. But in the weeks since, her attitude had mollified: the Doctor wasn't just "another scientist," and the things she learned from him were far above anything she could learn at Cambridge.

The letter's arrival had forced her to make a choice: step back and return to her old life, or jump off the edge into something wilder, scarier. Even now, poised to leap, she wasn't entirely sure she was making the right choice.

The uncertainty thrilled her.

"Yes, well I see no reason why not." The Brigadier gave the vaguest hint of a smile. "You've been quite useful."

"Oh well that's good of you to say so," Liz said.

"Credit where it's due, Miss Shaw. I'll have someone start on the paperwork. How's the Doctor? Still sulking?"

"I'm not sure that's the term I'd use," Liz replied.

Try as she might, Liz couldn't imagine what it must have been like to witness the death of an entire world, yet that was exactly what the Doctor claimed to have done. Drawn to what he'd called "a parallel space-time continuum," he'd seen another Earth consumed by flames, been powerless to stop it. He'd saved this Earth, of course, and been all smiles afterwards, but as the days went by, the psychological impact had begun to show.

It was some way from what the Brigadier called sulking.

“Well, can’t have him wasting time brooding,” the Brigadier said with a lack of sensitivity Liz couldn’t be sure was feigned or genuine. “Things to do, Miss Shaw, things to do.” He pushed back his chair and stood up. “Shall we?”

It was the singing she missed the most.

Ordinarily, when Liz walked into the lab, she would be greeted by snatches of opera, rambunctious renditions of concertos or long-forgotten music-hall numbers – the soundtrack to the Doctor’s endeavours. His musical stylings conferred an enthusiasm on her she’d not enjoyed since her student days, and when the Doctor had enlisted her help to repair the console from his TARDIS, actually allowed her to tinker with technology way outside what she could have imagined… she couldn’t have been happier.

Now silence hung over the lab like a funeral pall. The Doctor was hunched over a device Liz recently learned was a “dematerialization circuit.” He didn’t look up as she and the Brigadier walked in.

“Ah, there you are, Doctor.” The Brigadier strode up to the bench, casting a long shadow over it and the circuit. “Got a little job for you.”

The Doctor sighed. “Can’t someone else deal with it?” he asked abrasively. “This is extremely delicate work.”

“Yes, well, shouldn’t take long,” the Brigadier declared. “What is that thing anyway?”

“The key to my escape,” the Doctor said with weary irritation.

“I see,” the Brigadier lied. “Well, the sooner you get started, the sooner you can get back to it.”

“Just what is it exactly you want me to do, Brigadier?”

“Bit of a mystery that needs clearing up.” The Brigadier tucked his swagger stick under his arm, his torso appearing to inflate in conjunction with the movement. “Dead chap downstairs we need you to look at.”

“Murdered?” Liz asked.

“Not so far as anyone can tell,” the Brigadier answered. “Not a mark on him.”

“Well it seems perfectly straightforward,” the Doctor huffed. “Natural causes, surely.”

“When I said there wasn’t a mark on him, I meant it,” the Brigadier replied. “There’s not a single indication of the cause of death, natural or otherwise. In fact, no one has the foggiest idea how he died at all.”

A hush fell over the room again… then the Doctor dismounted from his lab stool. “Oh very well. I can see I’m going to get no peace until I agree to take a look.”

“As you say, Doctor,” the Brigadier said, and Liz was sure she caught a glint in the soldier’s eye.

“Crafty old devil,” she murmured.

The UNIT morgue was painted the same shade of pale green favoured by institutional buildings all across England, its caustic smell of disinfectant replacing the usual reek of bureaucracy and despair.

The body had already been arrayed on a table in the centre of the room – a man in his mid-twenties, Liz guessed, with sharply defined musculature. An athlete, perhaps? Certainly heart defects weren't unusual in the very fit.

"Who was he?" she asked.

"Name's Jimmy Whitlam," the Brigadier answered. "Ran a boxing club down in Clapham. Decent fighter himself, by all accounts. Caretaker found him sitting behind the desk in his office. Had to break the door down to get to him."

Aware of the Doctor lurking on the periphery of her vision, Liz moved around the table, peering at the body.

"How long ago did you say this man died?"

"About six hours," the Brigadier said.

"That's not possible," Liz murmured. If that were true, she should have been able to see lividity, the settling of blood in the body now the heart was no longer keeping it moving.

"Why don't you check for rigor, Liz?" The Doctor hovered off to one side, as if unwilling to fully commit to the examination. From the tone of his voice, Liz already knew what she'd find.

She took one of the man's wrists, lifted his arm. The limb was supple, bent easily at the elbow, and the hand flopped loosely on the end of it.

"He's still warm." She tried taking his pulse, found none and shot a look at the Brigadier. "Six hours? You're sure?"

"I'm quite capable of telling the time, Miss Shaw."

Liz rubbed her forehead pensively. "There should be *some* indication of how he died. For all I can see here, he could still be alive."

"That's because he is."

As one, Liz and the Brigadier turned to the Doctor. "And just what is that supposed to mean, Doctor?" asked the Brigadier.

"It means that this man is no more dead than you or I. In fact, I imagine he rather wishes he were."

"Doctor…" Liz began.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I expect an explanation's probably in order."

"If it's not too much trouble," the Brigadier said. Liz masked a smile – she'd missed the back-and-forth between the two men.

Focusing on a plastic lunchbox, left open on a nearby workbench, the Doctor sauntered across the room, plucked something from it, then, with a flourish, presented it for their identification. An orange.

He then wandered to another table – Liz wondered if he wasn't being deliberately slow, to further frustrate the Brigadier – and picked up a large metal tray. Holding it in one hand, he rested the bottom edge on the table while tilting the top up, to form a makeshift ramp. Then, with his other hand, he held his newly acquired piece of fruit at the top of the slope.

"Would you agree that the only reason the orange doesn't roll down the tray is because I'm holding it in place?"

"Yes," the Brigadier agreed hesitantly, as if expecting some kind of trick.

"And that if I let go of it, it will continue on its merry way to the bottom?"

"Well obviously, Doctor. I fail to see—"

"By lifting the orange to the top of the slope, I've endowed it with potential energy," the Doctor explained. "I've transferred the energy it required for me to lift the orange to the orange itself, enabling it to overcome the force of gravity. But if I move the orange to the bottom of the slope," the Doctor did so, resting the fruit on the benchtop, "I've removed its potential for motion."

Liz grasped for the concept, feeling it slip and squirm away from her. "Are you saying that this man has been…?"

"Moved to the bottom of the slope, if you will. You see, every living thing requires chronon energy to move through time. His has been stripped away."

"But you said he isn't dead," the Brigadier cut in.

"My dear fellow, he isn't." The Doctor fixed him with serious eyes. "Mr. Whitlam is still in there, looking out at us. And that's how he'll stay for all eternity."

There had to be a trick. As pit boss, it was Gavin's job to stop it. Trouble was, he couldn't.

The punter at the roulette table had started small, doubling his stake on red and black, before moving up to line bets, then corner bets, shortening his odds and increasing his winnings.

It wasn't just lucky, it was impossible: Gavin knew for a fact that the wheel was fixed so the house won. So how was this bloke *doing* it? A grim, professional fascination had settled on Gavin. He had to know… but the pile of chips in front of the gambler had stacked up too far now, a crowd of hangers-on attracted to him like iron filings to a magnet, and Gavin couldn't hold off any longer.

Time to close things down.

A waitress sashayed past, and Gavin tapped her lightly on the shoulder. "Get the manager, love," he said. "Chop chop."

In Gavin's opinion, the manager was a complete waste of space. Installed a few years back – a reward from the owner for some past favour, so Gavin understood – the boss was wetter than a Bank Holiday weekend, his idea of running the business going no further than turning up every night in a dinner jacket and "consoling" any pretty women who lost a packet at blackjack. If not for Gavin, he'd have run the place into the ground a long time ago.

But someone was going to have to front up the owners if the house lost big tonight, Gavin thought. *Better him than me.*

"No more bets, please."

Gavin swore to himself. He'd hoped to close the table before the next spin; shouldn't have let his mind wander.

The croupier spun the wheel, sending the little white ball in the opposite direction. Her face was waxy, pale, her eyes on the green baize in front of her.

Only one bet had been placed, a large stack of white plastic chips, each worth one hundred pounds. There had to be fifty thousand quid riding on the spin.

All of it on zero.

Gavin didn't know whether to laugh or vomit. The chances of zero coming up were less than three per cent – by every law of reason and probability, the house should be about to win back everything it had lost. But this mystery punter hadn't dropped a bet all night, and Gavin's practised mind had already totted up the damage if zero came up.

One point eight million.

The ball was losing momentum now, clattering over the notches in the wheel, skipping and bouncing in its search for a resting place.

Gavin held his breath. The entire room seemed to freeze.

Without his even noticing, the ball had stopped.

On zero.

The crowd erupted, and Gavin stuck out a hand to steady himself, clamping the bare arm of the woman next to him so hard she squealed.

"Excuse me. Pardon me, ladies, gents." Gavin looked round. The manager was making his own way across the floor, and Gavin giggled crazily at the sight. Perfect timing. Just perfect.

The manager's gaze settled on the big winner, now glad-handing his entourage of well-wishers, and he stopped dead in his tracks, as if frozen to the spot.

He knows him, Gavin realized.

"'Allo," the gambler said. "Long time." And he raised his arms, as if inviting the manager to hug him.

The manager murmured a single word, barely loud enough for Gavin to catch it… then turned and ran.

Except the more the manager ran, the slower he got. Gavin ordered his own limbs to move, but their response was similarly, terrifyingly deliberate.

All around, people moved with a lethargic lack of pace, as if Gavin was watching a film and someone had slowed the playback to a quarter speed. Less.

Then he blinked… and the gambler was gone.

Bewildered, Gavin looked about him, the vague, confused expression on his face mirrored in those around him. Then professional instinct took over, and he checked the table. Relief surged in his chest, as he saw what appeared to be every single chip that the mystery man had won, still sitting there, forgotten. And standing beside it, staring blankly at the neglected winnings, was the manager.

Gavin reeled. The gambler vanishing, the manager suddenly appearing on the other side of the room… "Boss," he gasped, his chest hot and tight. He placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Boss."

The manager rocked gently at his touch, and Gavin was seized by the sudden, absurd idea that someone had switched him for a shop window dummy. Then the man toppled forward like a felled tree, crashing face-first into the table and bouncing off to lie face up on the carpet.

Gavin would have screamed, but the crowd of punters was already taking care of that for him.

Liz pressed her fingers into the manager's neck, searching for a pulse, but finding nothing. She shivered as she stepped away from him. The thought that he was watching her from within his fleshy prison, a prison he would inhabit for eternity, was profoundly unsettling, but closing his eyes and condemning him to see nothing but darkness seemed worse.

The Doctor hovered over by the roulette wheel, taking readings with something that looked like an ohmmeter. Occasionally he raised a slim metal tube that emitted a high, buzzing sound, then placed it on the table while he scribbled in a notebook. He'd called the tube a sonic screwdriver, used it a few times while he and Liz worked on the TARDIS console, but Liz had no idea how it would apply here. This was hardly repair work.

"Any clues?" she asked.

"Yes," the Doctor replied. "This entire room is showing signs of localized chronon deficiency. It seems our culprit has learned how to do more than drain people."

"So he can stop time long enough to cheat at roulette." Liz found the idea more than a little crass. She picked up one of the chips from the tabletop. "I wonder why he didn't take the money?"

"I should say the money wasn't his priority, rather something he used to draw out his target." The Doctor indicated vaguely in the direction of the manager.

"He can stop time," Liz said. "He could have done this to the manager anywhere."

"Ah, but our man was sending a message. He was announcing himself to someone."

"He's going to do this again."

"Yes. Seems rather like a vendetta, wouldn't you say?" The Doctor rubbed the side of his nose.

"Excuse me, sir. Ma'am."

"Ah, detective." The Doctor grinned broadly, with the effect of visibly unsettling the plainclothes policeman who'd materialized behind them. It had been this same officer who'd tried to prevent him and Liz from entering the casino when they'd first arrived; the Doctor had taken him off to one side, and a minute later had acquired unfettered access to the crime scene. Whatever he'd said to the unfortunate investigator, Liz noted, it had left the man entirely off balance. "May we assume you have some news for us?"

"Yes, sir," the detective murmured. "I've been talking to the pit boss, and I think we have an identification."

"Think, man? Do you or don't you?"

"Um…" The detective shuffled his feet. "We, er…"

The Doctor relaxed, patted the policeman on the shoulder. "Take your time."

"Well, it appears the manager recognized his killer. Called him by name: 'Brian.' He fits the description of the manager's brother."

"And?"

"That's just it, sir. I radioed the station to put out the description, and…"

"Spit it out, man."

"The man we're looking for… he's been dead for six years."

"Rather an intimidating fellow, wouldn't you agree?"

The Brigadier regarded the picture clipped to the cover of the manila folder, the full-face image of Brian Arthur Brushwood. With thinning hair, a broad nose and small eyes that spoke of a profound capacity for cruelty and violence, the mug shot had given Liz the creeps.

"Chap's got a record as long as a regimental dinner speech," the Brigadier commented, leafing through the loose pages in the file. "Where did you get this, Doctor?"

"Friend of mine in the Flying Squad," the Doctor said. "Chief Superintendent Bishop. We belong to the same club. I mentioned I was interested in this Brushwood fellow, and he had the file brought straight over." Liz smiled with dawning understanding of how the Doctor had talked his way past the detective at the casino.

The Brigadier riffled through the pages to the end, pored over the last of them. "So what you're trying to tell me is that we have two dead bodies that aren't actually dead, and a killer who most decidedly is?"

"It would appear so. Although I'm not sure the constabulary didn't arrive at their conclusion a little prematurely." The Doctor tucked a hand into his pocket and lounged against the bench. "According to that file, our friend Brushwood was killed in an explosion six years ago. Some kind of device detonated in a lock-up garage in White City."

"White City?" The Brigadier asked. "Six years ago?"

"Yes, man. Now if you really must insist on parroting everything I say…"

"Well, they can't have got it right," Liz said. "There's more to this."

"Well done, Liz, spot on. You see, the body they pulled from the ruins was identified as Brian Brushwood by the man's brother, Archibald."

"The casino manager," Liz explained to the Brigadier.

"Precisely so," the Doctor continued. "The death certificate was issued purely on the basis of that identification."

"Which raised the question," Liz chipped in, "of why a badly burned body wasn't subject to more rigorous proof of identity."

"Apparently, there was a story doing the rounds of the underworld at the time," the Doctor said. "Hearsay, of course, but illuminating in its own way. It goes that our Mr. Brushwood was planning on leaving the crime business, and taking rather a lot of money with him. Unfortunately, that money belonged to a newly minted crime lord, Tony Nero. Now Nero wasn't altogether happy with this, so sent a couple of men to stop him."

"Archie and that Whitlam fellow," the Brigadier surmised.

"Quite. So Nero had his money back, Brian had disappeared, and the police had a body identified as him. There was a brief investigation, but nothing could be proved, and no one saw the need to pursue it further."

"And now Brushwood's looking for revenge," the Brigadier said.

"But we still don't know how he's doing it," said Liz.

"No. I was thinking a visit to the site of the explosion might turn up some clues." The Doctor crossed to the door and swept his cape from an adjacent hatstand. "It's only a few minutes across town, we could make it in—"

"Actually, Doctor," the Brigadier interjected, "I can probably save you a trip."

The Doctor paused in the doorway, an eyebrow raised. "Oh?"

"The address, where our boy was blown up," said the Brigadier, indicating the file, now closed on the bench. "White City. I think you'll find it's a UNIT case. One of our earliest jobs, actually."

"Indeed?" The Doctor's aspect took on a stormy curiosity.

"Bomb squad knew some device had caused the fire, couldn't identify it. Said it didn't resemble anything they'd ever seen before. Called in the army to take a look, and they came up blank too, handed the whole mess over to us. We still have all the bits in storage."

"Well, why didn't you say so, man?" The Doctor scowled at the Brigadier, who opened his mouth to reply then immediately closed it. "What are you waiting for? Take me to them!"

"The man's a menace," the Doctor declared, turning a blackened circuit board over in his hands. The workbench before him was scattered with several cardboard boxes worth of components, a host of twisted and carbon-scored bits of metal. To Liz, the pile of wreckage represented a baffling melange of indecipherable technology. The Doctor, on the other hand, was like a child presented with a bulging stocking on Christmas morning.

"Who?"

"The Brigadier. It's inconceivable that he should be hoarding material like this and not think to tell me."

"You know what all this is then?"

"Oh, most certainly. This, my dear Liz, is all that remains of a Type One Dalek time ship."

"A time ship? Like yours?"

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her. "Hardly. No, this is much more primitive. He scratched behind his ear, absently. "1965…"

"Something wrong?"

"No. No, that would make sense, I suppose."

"What would?"

"Here, hold this." The Doctor handed Liz a hemispherical component, the array of wires dangling from it giving it a look not unlike a metal jellyfish. "Just as I thought. The chronon sink is missing."

A small smile played over Liz's lips as she regarded the bewildering array of damaged electronics that was spread out over half the room. "Don't tell me: everything but the chronon sink?"

"No, not quite everything." Liz hadn't expected a belly laugh, but the dark expression that had settled over the Doctor's face was miles off. It was like gloomy resignation. No, she realized: it was disappointment, like the child had got to the bottom of the stocking and found Father Christmas had forgotten the one thing he really wanted.

"All right," Liz said, scrabbling to change the subject. "What's a chronon sink?"

The Doctor straightened up and perched himself on the edge of the bench. "You remember what I was telling you about the energy required to move through time?" Liz nodded. "Well in the ordinary run of events, that energy remains at something approaching a constant. But when a person – or, in this case, a vessel – moves through time in defiance of the natural means, those energy levels enter a state of flux."

"Energy can't be created or destroyed, but can be acquired or lost," Liz said in agreement.

"Exactly so. Now it's the job of a chronon sink to regulate that energy. When a vessel absorbs too much, the sink stores it. When there's a loss of energy, the sink provides from what it has accumulated."

"Preventing the kind of thing that's happened to those men."

"Indeed."

"So you're saying that Brushwood somehow got hold of this sink and is using it to drain people's time energy."

"That would be a reasonable conclusion."

"Good," Liz said. "Well now we can stop him."

The Doctor looked up, his expression hawkish. "I certainly hope so. Because if this Brushwood chap continues to use the sink at the rate he has been, the results could be nothing short of catastrophic."

Tony Nero opened a small gap in the curtains and peered through. Somewhere, out in the dark of the grounds, a dozen men were patrolling, all of them tooled up and expecting trouble. Within the house itself, another eight men were walking the corridors. The house was like a fortress.

Still Tony couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't enough.

He let the curtains fall closed. He needed a drink. Pulling a bottle from his decorative booze cabinet – a globe, the upper hemisphere of which swung open to reveal the bottles, glasses and ice bucket within – and sloshed a sizeable quantity of malt into a heavy tumbler.

He'd paid little attention when Jimmy Whitlam had died. It had been unfortunate, yes, but nothing for him to concern himself about. The boy had died in a locked room – there was no possibility of naughtiness.

Then Archie Brushwood had died at the casino. Listening to the tales of madness surrounding the death, and then learning the description of the man the police sought for questioning… well, then Nero sat up and took notice.

Brian Brushwood was still alive.

Nero took a belt from the whisky and cursed his own laziness. He'd been too ready to take Archie's word for it that Brian was dead. There'd been a body – and where the *hell* had that come from? – Nero had got his money back, and everyone around town knew what happened if you tried to cheat the new head of the Business. Why bother chasing the details?

But Nero had known Archie was milky, spineless. He hadn't even been sure the little squit was up to the job, but it had amused him to think of it: Archie facing down his big brother. Besides, he'd sent Jimmy along as a backup… and Jimmy said he'd seen the body, too.

No. He should have made sure… Now here he was, stuck out in his Surrey estate, surrounded by muscle but as alone in the night as he'd ever been.

A disturbance of the air behind him told Nero the library door had opened, silent on well-oiled hinges.

Of all the men at his beck and call, not a single one would dare come into a room where Tony Nero was alone without knocking first.

It was time.

"Best get it over with then," he said, keeping his back to the door. He stooped a little, set his glass down on the edge of the globe, the action disguising the motion of his other hand. He closed his grip on the small but brutal revolver stashed between the bottles. "I ain't got all night."

Turning quickly, he brought up the gun.

The guards had no idea he'd got past them.

Suspending them in the moment between an eyeblink, Brian had sauntered past, hadn't even bothered to hunch over, or to run the open space between the treeline and the house. Even if someone inside had seen him, they were no threat. Not when you had the power of a god.

It hadn't come easy, that power. It'd hurt, of course. He'd been blown up, ferchrissake – he should have been dead. Instead, he'd woken up in a back alley off Tottenham Court Road, howling in agony. It wasn't until he staggered out onto the street, bleeding but somehow still breathing, that he'd gone mad.

There was no way of telling, but it had seemed like weeks he'd spent like that, wandering London like it was a snapshot, and he was the only thing in the picture that could move. He'd tried to wake people up – shouted at them, slapped them, even pushed one or two of them over – but all he'd been met with was the same unmoving, glazed response.

Nor could he make sense of his injuries: they neither killed him nor healed. In comparison, coming to terms with what he read in newspapers, on calendars and watches was a problem for a later date. He'd laughed when he'd thought that, actually laughed out loud, because that was the point. It *was* a later date.

Two forty-eight, July 21, 1971. And it lasted forever.

In the early days, he'd tried to keep busy, to learn what he could about what had happened to him. It amused him that he'd been declared dead; that arse Archie had identified his body, hadn't had a clue that the corpse in the garage was the original owner of the place. But the amusement hadn't lasted. Soon it was replaced by boredom, frustration, a kind of dissociated numbness.

He took to spending days looking at clocks, willing the second hands to move, just *move*. Then one day, they did. Gradually, so slowly that he scarcely noticed, the world around him came to life again. It was a little longer before Brian worked out it was the machinery, the bits of metal that had travelled to 1971 with him, which he was still carrying around. The machinery was controlling time. And he was controlling the machinery.

He'd had to experiment, of course, something that coincided neatly with his need to acquire first food and shelter, then clothes, money, power. At last, he could manipulate time in ways he'd never imagined, all his work building to one moment. This moment: standing outside the library of Tony Nero's country retreat, poised to claim his freedom.

Brian lifted his hand to the door knob, the heat of his palm warming the brass, and it struck him – a question, one that had never occurred to him before.

After this, what next?

The answer came directly, simple and incontrovertible.

Anything I like.

He turned the handle and opened the door.

"Ah there you are, old chap. Do come in."

Shock held Brian like an insect in amber. Sitting in an armchair – Tony Nero's armchair – one leg crossed indolently over the other, a glass of red wine held under his beakish nose, was… well, no one Brian recognized. Clad in a rich velvet jacket the same colour as his drink, the stranger was entirely at ease. Unflappable.

"Take a seat, why don't you? We have rather a lot to talk about."

"Who are you?" Brian asked. "Where's Nero?"

"I'm the Doctor, and this is Liz Shaw." Brian had been so taken off balance he hadn't even noticed the slim, blonde woman by the window. Unlike her companion, she had a cold aloofness about her, but it wasn't enough to fool Brian. One thing he'd got good at over the years, it was reading people, and under her casual veneer, the woman was nervous. Scared.

Now *that* Brian was used to.

"Where's Nero?" Brian asked again.

"I'm afraid Mr. Nero is occupied elsewhere," the Doctor said. "We dropped by earlier on and suggested it might be a good idea if he took a drive for a few hours. To give us a chance to talk."

"Got nothing to say to you."

"Ah now, you see that won't do at all," tutted the Doctor. "It's most important that you listen to me. I know about the machine you're using to seek your revenge. I need you to give it to me before it's too late."

Brian chuckled mirthlessly. “Too late? No such thing as too late, not for me. Not anymore.”

“You’re making a terrible mistake,” the Doctor said. “The device stores temporal energy, but its capacity is limited—”

“Do what?”

“The more time energy you drain from the world around you, the less the chronon sink can hold. And by my calculations yours is about to overflow.”

“So what, I give it to you, and you make it all better? I ain’t stupid.”

“On the contrary,” the Doctor snapped, “that’s exactly what you appear to be.” Brian flushed. No one talked to him like that, even back in the old days. Back before he had all this power. “Now it’s perfectly simple, you must give me—”

“No, it ain’t simple at all,” Brian cut in. “Number one, because I don’t want to give it back. And number two, it wouldn’t matter if I did.”

Brian raised his hands to his chest, and with a sharp motion, tore open his shirt.

“Oh no,” the Doctor said. “Oh no.”

The moment Brian entered the room, Liz knew; no matter how reasonable and persuasive the Doctor could be, he wouldn’t be able to talk the criminal down.

Pale, febrile and wild-eyed, Brian Brushwood was a shadow of the man Liz had seen in his mug shots. It was an aspect she’d seen before while training as a doctor, and it was one she would never get used to – the look of an addict. Brian had grown to love his power, just as the power had grown to consume him, but while the energy in the chronon sink was clearly burning Brian away, there was no chance he would ever be persuaded to give it up.

Then, when he tore open his shirt and displayed what lay beneath it, Liz realized she barely knew the half of it.

The bullet wound was serious, no doubt about it. An inch to the left of his navel, the ragged, black hole was crusted with dark crimson, evidence of extreme bleeding, the kind there was no walking away from. Yet no blood seeped from the hole; it merely gaped at her like a dark, unblinking eye. Above the wound, however, there was worse.

Embedded in Brian’s chest and abdomen, poking up through the skin like icebergs protruding above the surface of the ocean, was an aggregation of components, all of them akin to the ones the Doctor had examined in the UNIT storage facility. Sparks of green and blue crackled from them, once parts of the time ship, now parts of Brian himself.

“Listen to me,” the Doctor said. He was on his feet now, his voice loaded with authority but, to Liz’s familiar ear, the faintest accent of nervousness. “I can remove those things from you, return you to normal. Give you your life back. You must let me help you.”

Brian smirked. “What would I need your help for, old man? I’ve got all the help I need right here.”

"You have to understand. That device is dangerously close to overloading – look at it, man!" Brian's eyes radiated hatred, stayed fixed on the Doctor. "The effects will be disastrous, not just for you, but for everyone in this house."

"I'll take my chances."

The Doctor dipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew his tubular device – the sonic screwdriver – positioning his thumb over a small button on the casing. "You should know that I have no desire to hurt you, but if you compel me to destroy the circuit…"

"Do your worst."

With no idea what was coming next, Liz did the only thing that sprang to mind and covered her ears.

Nothing happened.

Gradually, the Doctor was lowering the metal tube to his side, unused. He was staring at something, attention riveted to it. Liz tracked his gaze.

It took a second or so to realize what she was looking it, then her perception shifted just enough, and she remembered.

Among the hi-tech detritus that had fused with Brian's chest, was a component about the size of her fist, its familiarity arresting her awareness. While not identical, it resembled very closely the gadget that had claimed all the Doctor's efforts in recent weeks, the "key to his escape."

Embedded in Brushwood's chest, and so far as Liz could see, completely intact, was a dematerialization circuit.

The Doctor raised his sonic screwdriver again, and again failed to activate it. There, right in front of him, was the answer to his exile. All he had to do was remove it from that poor fellow Brushwood, and get it to the UNIT labs in one piece.

But the sonic was indiscriminate: creating the sound wave that would fuse the activation element of the chronon sink would render the dematerialization circuit a useless lump of slag. And the sink *had* to be dealt with.

His thumb hovered over the sonic's trigger switch.

Liz opened her mouth to shout, "Doctor, stop him!" A long, protracted groaning emanated from her throat, her words, her very breath inhibited, drawn out like hot toffee.

The Doctor had hesitated too long. Brushwood was draining their chronon energy. They were too late.

Beside her, the Doctor raised the sonic screwdriver again, the motion fluid, incomprehensibly swift from Liz's decelerated viewpoint. Confusion splashed across Brushwood's face, and the atmosphere thickened, sapped more and more of the energy from Liz…

Her mind raced while her body struggled to catch up. The Doctor should be frozen to the spot, just as she was, his chronon energy drained at the same rate as—

Except, Liz thought, the Doctor had energy to spare. The Doctor was a time traveller.

Brian roared.

With the power he was exerting, everyone in the room should be trapped in the space of a heartbeat, but still the old man was moving, pointing that daft metal pipe at him. Brian concentrated, increased his grip, drawing more and more energy from his adversary.

Still the man continued to move; Brian could see it now, etched into his face. Fear.

Just a little more, and Brian would drain him dry.

"Doctor, stop him!"

Liz failed to make the connection, that the words were her own, and what that signified, until after she was on the ground. The Doctor slammed into her, his momentum knocking her off her feet. She landed, the Doctor on top of her, just as the room imploded.

A vortex had formed in the centre of Brushwood's chest, a dark, twisting whirlpool of light that pulled and distorted him from the inside out. Liz stared, appalled, helpless, as the criminal's body pulsed towards the centre of the singularity, his very being contracting, expanding, contracting. And then, Brian Brushwood collapsed in upon himself, like a hole had opened behind him and a short, sharp tug had yanked him through.

"Liz?" The Doctor said. "Liz, are you all right?"

Suddenly aware that she was shivering, Liz nodded. As far as she could tell, she was unharmed – all intact, nothing broken.

Nothing physical.

She stood before the door, quite unable to move.

A week had passed since Brian Brushwood had died, and every waking moment of those seven days, she'd wondered what she was going to say to the Brigadier. Now she was here, outside his office, she couldn't even bring herself to knock.

It had been there, under the surface, all the time, that vague, nagging uncertainty. Looking back, she'd felt it the whole time, ever since she'd decided to forgo Cambridge and stay with UNIT, but it had taken Brushwood's death for her to understand it.

She'd wondered if it wasn't some kind of denial, a psychological blind spot that, by definition, she'd never noticed. Not the first time, when the Doctor had tricked her into stealing the TARDIS key from the Brigadier, and then used it to try to escape. Not even when they'd been working on the console, in the lab at the Inferno project, and he'd as good as spelled it out for her: "Without the

TARDIS, I feel rather lost. A stranger in a foreign land. A shipwrecked mariner."

It had taken that moment of hesitation, when she'd seen the Doctor spot the dematerialization circuit in Brushwood's chest, and freeze up. *Then* she'd known.

The Doctor didn't belong with UNIT. He'd always – always – be struggling to get free.

And where would that leave her?

She'd thought, thought hard, and it hadn't taken long to find the answer. She'd felt it in recent weeks, as the Doctor retreated into himself, and she'd been left to the day-to-day lab work of a UNIT employee. But she'd experienced it most keenly after the shutdown of Stahlman's drill, when the Doctor, in high dander, had insulted the Brigadier then transported himself away with the TARDIS console.

He'd gone just far enough away to land on a rubbish tip and make a fool of himself, but at the time, Liz hadn't known that. Without the force of the Doctor to act on her, she was static, unable to do anything but wait, and hope that he would come back.

A man who'd proven time and again that he was capable of leaving without a second thought.

Without her.

And slowly, deliberately, Liz had stepped back from the edge.

"Are you all right, Miss Shaw?"

She turned and looked up into the earnest face of the sergeant she'd met only a short while ago – Benton. "Yes," she said, drawing in a deep breath. "I just have something I need to do."

Raising her arm, she knocked.

A Torch in the Darkness II: A Legendary Hero

by David N. Smith & Violet Addison

The ship was out of control again.

As far as Barbara could tell, the old man never actually had it under his control at all. The Doctor would scowl and protest when his skills as a pilot were questioned, but he had never once managed to deliver them anywhere close to home, or even accurately tell them where or when they were upon arrival. As the days had unfolded, her hopes of returning home had slowly faded, until sometimes she doubted if she would ever see Coal Hill School again. Now she just clung to the edge of the console, as the room pitched and lurched around her, knowing that there was nothing else she could do, as they once again plunged headlong into the unknown.

With a grinding, wheezing moan, the room shuddered to a halt.

The Doctor coughed with embarrassment, his eyebrows raised innocently, as if he was somehow hoping they would not have noticed the volatile landing.

"That was a little rougher than usual," Barbara ventured, deliberately needling the old man's wounded pride. She had long since learnt that he would give far more away through his erratic bouts of anger, than he ever would from being asked a direct question.

The Doctor harrumphed, but managed to restrain his normally defensive temper. The old man had mellowed as their days together had progressed. The departure of his granddaughter had broken the old man's heart, softening his previously hardened persona, particularly towards Vicki, the newest member of their crew. Initially, Barbara has assumed Vicki was just filling the void in the old man's affections left by Susan, but now she could see there was more to it, that it was a bond forged on their mutual loss of their respective families. He was more open and honest with his emotions than before. The old man who had wanted to be left alone to pursue his research, had finally realized that he both needed and wanted the company of others. He would never admit it, but he was growing because of their presence.

The old man looped an affectionate arm around the teenage orphan's shoulders, giving Vicki a reassuring squeeze after the violent journey, while tapping an index finger thoughtfully against his chin.

"Yes, a very unusual landing, I agree." The Doctor nodded as he gestured excitedly in the air. "It was as if there was some huge, unseen force acting upon the ship! Driving us off course!"

"Oh, an outside force, was it?" Barbara sighed, rolling her eyes. She had heard his endless excuses before, and was no longer taken in by them. "Because it couldn't simply be your fault, could it?"

"No, it could not!" the Doctor huffed outwardly, but his eyes sparkled with curiosity. "I wonder where it has brought us and why. Hmm? Those are far more important questions than your childish accusations, don't you think?"

"Well, we won't know unless we take a look around," interrupted Vicki, playing the peacemaker to the squabbling adults. "Is it safe to go outside?"

“A sensible question at last!” The Doctor patted the girl affectionately on the shoulder, as he shuffled around the console. “Radiation normal. Gravity normal. Air normal. Yes, I’d say so, child. The atmosphere is quite safe. In fact, I believe we have once again landed upon your Earth. Who knows, perhaps even in the twentieth century.”

The Doctor clutched the lapels of his jacket, nodding proudly, pleased with the results displayed on the panels in front of him.

“Well, I agree with you then,” replied Ian, peering over the Doctor’s shoulder, looking at displays, pretending he understood them. “If it is twentieth century Earth, it must be some unseen force that’s driven us off-course. It couldn’t possibly have been you that got us there.”

Barbara tried hard to suppress her smile, but did not quite succeed. She was so grateful Ian was there, always backing her up again the difficult old man.

“Oh, there really is no pleasing either of you, is there!?” The Doctor fumed in exasperation, but there was a glint in the old man’s eye and a playful smile on his lips, as even he knew that he could not both blame the unseen force and still take credit for their landing.

The old man really had changed. In the past, such an exchange could easily have ended with a threat to throw them off the ship.

“No, Doctor. There’s no pleasing us.” Ian smirked. “We’re just very difficult.”

“Well, my boy, I’m glad you can admit it. You see, it’s not so difficult to admit when you’re wrong, is it?” The Doctor flicked a switch and gazed up at the scanner screen. The image, rather unhelpfully, displayed only darkness. “Let’s go outside and see where we are, shall we? Vicki, fetch me a torch from the cupboard, would you?”

As the young girl obediently obeyed, the old man activated the door control, making the tall, white double doors hum open. Taking the torch from Vicki, he turned it on and shone the beam out into the dark. Ian led the way outside, with Barbara staying close to his elbow. She always remained cautious when they arrived in a new location, as even if it appeared to be the Earth, there was still every chance that it would be swarming with Daleks, or that they would have been accidently shrunk to the size of a mouse. Life in the TARDIS was never safe or simple.

They stepped out into a large room, their footfalls echoing off of the flagstones. The Doctor paused to lock the TARDIS door, and then turned his torch beam to point across the room, revealing a series of tall ceramic pots, standing beside a polished wall that glinted in the beam of light.

The Doctor tapped his fingers against the wall, producing a distinctive metallic ringing.

“Bronze,” he remarked in surprise. “Walls of bronze.”

Barbara knelt down by the tall pots, studying the scenes depicted in black paint on their surface. They were images were of ancient warriors, with distinctive helmets, battling with shields and spears.

“These are Ancient Greek,” she informed them. “Judging by the size of the pots, these are mainly *hydria*, for carrying water. But there’s no dust or damage on them. They’re not even slightly faded. These are new.”

“Not the twentieth century then,” Ian remarked, but there was not even a hint of surprise or disappointment in his voice. He, like her, had come to accept that they were likely to be travelling with the Doctor for the foreseeable future. There was no point in them begrudging it, as despite the old man’s claims to the contrary, it was clearly beyond his ability to control where and when he took them. They had a unique chance to see the universe, and they were only just beginning to realize the scope of that opportunity, to seize and enjoy the random days that were being offered to them.

The Doctor cast the torch beam around the dark room, revealing a bronze couch at one end of the chamber, covered in blankets.

“I tell you what is odd,” said Vicki with a small gasp. “This room has no doors.”

The Doctor quickly spun on his heel, flicking the torch beam rapidly at each of the walls, scanning each of them in turn.

“She’s right,” Ian confirmed.

“Part of the roof is open to the sky though,” Barbara replied, standing up and straightening her skirt, as she gazed upwards. “I can see the stars.”

“This is a pit!” The Doctor exclaimed, glancing around him, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “It’s a cell for a prisoner!”

Ian nodded.

“Food and water can be lowered in, but there’s no way out. That makes sense. But that only begs the question, a cell for whom?”

Warily, the Doctor cast the torch beam back towards the small bed at the end of the bronze-walled pit. The blankets moved.

Ian instinctively stepped forward, putting himself side-by-side with the Doctor, forming a defensive wall in front of Barbara and Vicki, intent on protecting them from whatever emerged from the blankets. With all their travels in time and space, Barbara thought she was prepared for almost anything that might crawl out from the bed, from a ragged warrior to a hideous alien monstrosity, but somehow she was not ready for the figures that appeared.

A young, olive-skinned woman pushed her way out of the blankets. She used one hand to shield her eyes from the torchlight, while in her other arm she cradled a small child wrapped in swaddling. The baby was no more than a few hours old, its tiny face barely larger than the size of Barbara’s fist.

The Doctor and Ian stared at the woman, then glanced at each other, uncertain what to do. They were fine when confronted with noble kings or deadly monsters, but they had no idea what to do when faced with a mother and her newborn baby.

Ian, wordlessly, looked at Barbara.

She sighed and stepped forward, putting herself into the torchlight, casting a long shadow over the frightened woman. She raised her hands in a pacifying gesture.

“We mean you no harm. Are you all right? Do you need our help?”

The young woman's eyes filled with tears, but she bit her lower lip, using the self-inflicted pain to help her hold back her emotions.

"Zeus's majestic light fell on me. The baby is his. You must save him."

The woman fell to her knees, holding her tiny child upwards, offering it to the Doctor. The old man's eyes bulged in alarm, as he looked desperately to his companions for assistance. When nobody moved, he reluctantly turned his gaze back on the baby.

Barbara, having known him for so long, expected him to shrug the suggestion off, back away and leave the problem to her.

Instead, he stared at the child for a long moment, all his hostility and defensiveness slowly falling away from him, his face filling with a kindness that Barbara had never seen there before. "Why?" he asked, waving his fingers at the child, smiling as the tiny eyes followed his gestures. "Is he in danger?"

"My father will kill him!"

"Why would he possibly do that?" the Doctor asked, cautiously using a single finger to pull aside the swaddling so that he could get a better look at the baby. "He's only a little fellow."

"The Oracle at Delphi has prophesized that my son will kill his father, King Acrisius."

The Doctor's eyes widened with wild, mad curiosity.

"Really!"

"My father imprisoned me here, alone in this pit in his courtyard, away from any admirer, so that I would never even have the prophesized child."

"And yet you do appear to have, um, acquired one."

"Zeus found a way." The woman nodded, lowering her eyes to the floor.

"I bet he did," said Ian from the sidelines.

Vicki, without looking at him, slapped his upper arm with back of her hand.

"Ow!"

"Not helpful," she chided him.

The young woman with the baby ignored their exchange, lifting her eyes to meet the Doctor's gaze.

"Zeus takes many forms. Most often that of an old man, like the one before me. He will know I speak the truth."

"I see." The Doctor nodded. "So your son is half-god and half-human? Hmm? Now that's always a potent mix! I'm sure he will become a most remarkable young man."

"If he is given the chance to live. Will you save him, mighty Zeus?"

The Doctor leaned back, once again thoughtfully tapping his index finger against his chin.

"No."

"Doctor!" The surprise in Vicki's voice was earnest and powerful. She had never seen that side of him. She had never seen the cold and ruthless man they had first encountered in the junkyard. "It's a baby, how can you not save it?"

The Doctor glanced sideways at Barbara, his gaze dark and unforgiving.

“You, tell her,” he commanded, waving his hand at her. It was a cruel challenge, making her explain the ethics of their travels, forcing her to be advocate for his philosophy, when in the past she was the one had fought against it.

“We can’t change history,” Barbara sighed, repeating the words the Doctor had once told her. “Not one line of it.”

“Why not?” Vicki persisted, stepping towards the woman and child, only to find Ian hand’s on her shoulders, reluctantly restraining her.

The Doctor gently pushed Ian’s hands aside, slowly turning Vicki to face the TARDIS.

“The consequences of tampering with time can be calamitous. The future could be rewritten in incalculably complex ways, and besides, time itself would do its best to stop us.”

“How?”

“Imagine time as river, child. Our decisions are but tiny pebbles flung into it, and it takes more than a pebble to change the course of a river. Try to interfere with time and it is likely you will be swept away and drowned.”

“But if we succeed? If we change the course of the river?”

“Then the river will reshape the world for thousands of years in ways you could never predict. The repercussions would be unstoppable. Entire futures could be lost forever. We do not have the right to make such changes. Do you understand?”

Above them, the light of dawn was slowly creeping across the sky, the stars disappearing as the sky paled. The Doctor turned off his torch, allowing their eyes to adjust to the new levels of light. There were two men with spears standing at the top of the pit, silhouetted against the brightening sky, undoubtedly drawn by the sounds of their voices. There was no more time for debate. At any moment the sunlight would reach into the pit and they would become visible to the guards above; their conversation would be ended brutally by spears.

“Into the ship, quick!” Ian hissed. “We can’t stay here.”

The Doctor pulled a key from his pocket, undid the lock and hurriedly shepherded his companions through the doors into the TARDIS.

“But, I don’t understand,” Vicki continued her protest. She was still too kind-hearted to simply give up on the girl and her baby. “Can we not at least try? Is this an important point in history?”

“How can one tell for sure?” The Doctor shrugged. “But, yes, child. I think this an important moment. You see, I think that baby is the Greek hero, Perseus!”

Barbara could not help herself: she laughed, for the first time in her life mocking the man to his face. She shook her head.

“No, Doctor. I’m afraid not.” The old man might know his science, but history was her speciality. She had devoted her whole life to it. She had taught it for a living back at Coal Hill School. “Perseus is a mythological figure, not a real historical person. He’s not part of history, he’s just a story.”

The old man scowled.

"You think there's a difference?"

"Yes, I do," Barbara replied incredulously. "And, more to the point, so do you!"

"Do not presume to ever know my mind! Your twentieth century historians dismiss Troy and Atlantis as myths, yet in time your archaeologists will find evidence of both! Why should it not be true for a person, too? You have the audacity to believe you know the truth, when all you have seen are words in books!" The Doctor fumed, while the rest of them stared at him, shocked by his outburst. "Besides, we shall soon see who is correct."

"How so?" Ian's tone was non-confrontational. They all knew that the temper, despite being aimed at them, had more likely been caused by his resentment over his own decision to abandon the woman and her child to their fate. It would have reminded him of the day he left Susan behind. He may have stayed true to his beliefs, but it didn't mean he took any pleasure in his actions.

The Doctor grabbed hold of his lapels and strode around the room, feigning confidence, but unable to look any of them in the eye.

"In the original legend of Perseus, the King does not have the courage to kill his daughter and her child, for fear that it may anger Zeus, the child's father. So he locks them in a wooden box and casts them into the sea, so that Poseidon will be responsible for their deaths, not him. A plan which is unsuccessful. Perseus and his mother survive."

Barbara raised an eyebrow.

"A wooden box?" she asked.

"Yes." The Doctor turned to face her, his expression once again filled with innocence, as his three companions simultaneously reached the same conclusion.

"A box large enough to hold a woman and child?" A smile slowly slipped across Vicki's face. "So probably about the same size as a Police Box."

"Yes, well, it would have to be, wouldn't it?" The Doctor shrugged uncomfortably.

A moment later the young woman, still holding her child, stumbled through the doors, startled by the large white room that confronted her. The Doctor did not hesitate. He leaned across the console, hitting the door control switch, causing the large double doors to slam shut.

"And so the legend is begun. No damage done. Our not intervening being utterly the correct thing to do," he said, placing a reassuring hand on the young woman's shoulder, and giving the baby a smile as he did so. "Now stay calm, keep still and don't ask any difficult questions!"

On the scanner screen above them, they watched images of the ship being hoisted out of the pit and cast into the sea. As water filled the screen, without saying a word, the Doctor quietly set the TARDIS in flight. He was smiling as he watched the glass time rotor spin rhythmically up and down.

"Did you just cheat history?" asked Barbara, keeping her eyes on the nervous woman and child standing in the corner of the room.

"Time always wins, my dear." The Doctor shrugged. "Just this once, I gambled we were on the same side."

The TARDIS engines ground to a halt.

The old man leaned across the console and reached for the door control. Barbara almost cried out, alarmed that the old man had forgotten to check any of the readings, or even glance at the scanner screen to see the terrain outside.

"The island of Serifos," the Doctor announced with an uncommon confidence, as the doors swung open behind him, revealing a beach of pale sand. He grinned with obvious amusement at Barbara and Ian's shocked expressions.

"You got her to where she needed to be on your first attempt?" Ian shot the old man a questioning glance.

"Quite so. This beach is where she and her child were supposed to have washed ashore. They had to end up here." He nodded thoughtfully to himself. "I suspect there are forces in the universe, much more powerful than any of us, which guide us all in certain directions."

Barbara frowned at the old man.

"Are you talking about destiny?" she asked, skeptical that the old man, who had always been so dedicated to science, would prove to be so philosophical regarding time.

The Doctor nodded.

"Well, something brought us to this point, don't you agree?"

Barbara, dumbfounded by events, could only stand and nod as the young girl carried her legendary baby out onto the beach.

"So," Barbara began slowly, not wanting to sound foolish, but unable to stop herself from asking the question: "If this part of the legend of Perseus is true, what of the rest? Will Perseus go on to confront Medusa?"

"Hmm? Medusa?" The Doctor giggled slightly, utterly bemused. "A woman with snakes for her hair, who can turn people to stone with a mere glance? Really, my dear, do try to have some common sense. That would be ludicrous, wouldn't it?"

Barbara smiled, ignoring the old man's teasing attempts to rile her, quietly relieved that he had confirmed that such monsters could only exist in the imagination.

Next Episode
MEDUSA

The Storm Eaters

by Christopher Olsen

PHILADELPHIA, 1752

Jeremy Deane sat at his desk, hunched nervously over the papers in front of him, which he knew held the cornerstone of global scientific development. Concern was clearly etched onto his face, the perspiration pouring from his brow in much the same manner as the rain cascading down the window before him. The storm outside was an irate bull, screaming out its rage across the whole of the vast city of Philadelphia, thunder rumbling incessantly in the distance. A sudden, large lightning bolt in the distance prompted Jeremy to look up sharply at the skyline of gothic buildings, now becoming obscured by the tumultuous wind conditions.

An abrupt knock on the door prompted Jeremy to swivel round in his chair to admit the visitor.

"Come in," he called.

A nervously shaky man entered the room in a long, black buttoned-up tailcoat.

"My apologies, professor, but your equipment is making a loud disturbance upstairs. I think it has started."

Jeremy's eyes widened.

"Are you sure, Abraham?" he asked.

Abraham nodded sagely, causing Jeremy to clap his hands together with a child-like glee. He jumped to his feet, upsetting further papers to fall from his desk into the growing, scattered pile on the floor below.

"Our life's work… Finally the moment has bestowed itself upon us! No… rather upon me and not that darned fool Franklin! Ha!" he cried as he bolted out of the study and up the spiralling steps that led to the top of his stately home.

Emerging onto the roof, Jeremy ran breathlessly up to an assortment of telescopes, maps, metal metres and other strange-looking apparatus that were placed strategically across the roof, each connecting to one central spire positioned at the centre.

"The alignment should be perfectly in place. Oh, the scientific discovery of the century… and all credit to me!" Jeremy exclaimed triumphantly as he put on a pair of glasses and began fumbling with the various pieces of equipment linking up to the spire. He peered at the assortment of readings displayed before him as dials clicked and arrows flickered between numbers. Jeremy's face quickly turned from one of triumphant self-congratulation to one of concern.

"That can't be right. Not of this magnitude surely…?" he muttered to himself.

At this point, it was impossible to concentrate over the roar of the thunder in the sky and the lightning bolts striking the horizon. The rain was becoming torrential as the storm intensified to a critical point. Jeremy ignored this in his scientific curiosity, his hands fumbling eagerly as he adjusted the instruments, a distinct glint of intellectual greed in his eyes. The bolts of lightning were now

striking closer towards the house where Jeremy was situated. Jeremy looked up in a moment of dawning realization.

"The lightning rod!"

Jeremy dashed over to the spire and began scrabbling with some of the cabling connected to it. His wig fell to the floor as he grappled with the wires.

"Damned thing!" he said, his teeth gnashing.

A second later, a loud flash of lightning struck the spire and several bolts of electrical energy reverberated downwards towards the horror-struck Jeremy. Jeremy was caught in the electrical blast and he let out a blood-curdling scream as the electricity surged into him. He shook for a few moments, his eyes widening in a fixed state of shock. Then eventually, he slumped to the floor and lay still. The storm had begun to quieten now, the deafening howls of the wind abating. The rumbling in the clouds still continued but at a lower tempo, like a satisfied lion having just finished picking the last few strips of meat off a carcass. After a long pause, the city began to settle as people emerged from their dwellings knowing that finally the storm had passed. However, no one was present on that roof to observe the fact that, at that precise moment, Jeremy's lifeless hands had begun to twitch.

Abraham was not a confident man. Not since his overly religious father had refused to send him to law school and had beaten him into agreeing to train as a manservant to follow in his own footsteps. Resultantly, he and the other two young servants wearing similar attire were now rushing around in a panicked state trying to re-assort all of the fallen crockery and furniture in the kitchen following the lightning blast, before their aggressive master returned from what Abraham knew would be yet another unsuccessful experiment. Following on from such disappointments, Abraham would always provisionally prepare a square meal of warmed bread and cheese, served with grits and a boiled egg, which he knew to be Professor Deane's favourite. The storm had clearly distressed the scullery servants, Agnes and Seymour, both now rapidly replacing pots in the pantry cupboards.

"He'll be enraged again." Agnes proclaimed. "Like the devil risen, that's what he'll be like!"

Seymour, an even shyer man than Abraham by nature, nodded in agreement as he placed a wooden spoon in a drawer. Abraham lifted a finger to his lips and frowned at Agnes.

"Hush now, Agnes! I think I can hear him now."

An unusually slow thudding of footsteps came from the stairs.

Agnes shook her head. "I'm telling you, I have been considering transferring to that kind old Master Stewart's house for months now. If they reject me, then I would rather go back to any other job instead of this. He's insatiable!"

"Calm down," Seymour finally spoke. "It's just the storms, they've put us all on edge lately. Good Lord, it's as though God himself had opened the heavens upon our good Earth, ain't no mistake."

The footsteps became louder, and Abraham glared at the servants again to silence them. As this occurred, a faint sparking noise, pulsating with each step, became apparent to a now-puzzled Abraham. Could that infernal contraption on the roof have worked after all?

"Professor, is that you?" Abraham called out. "The house sure took a big punch off that storm. Young Agnes ain't even finished her prayers here yet, she's so shaken. Are you all right, sir?"

The expressions of all three servants turned to shock for the last time in their lives as a shadowy figure appeared in the doorway. It gazed down at its big, ink-stained hands, both covered in scorch marks with electrical bolts flickering around the fingertips. The figure smiled in a satisfied manner, as it closed the door behind it.

The Doctor stretched back on the sofa, put his hands behind his head and smiled in reminiscence. He looked back at Rose with mild expectation in his eyes; he knew that she had to be impressed by that story. Rose Tyler, on the other hand, looked far from enthralled as she maintained eye contact with him from across the TARDIS console.

"Seriously?" she asked.

"H'oh yes!" The Doctor grinned. "And then, just as Titchy and I were really getting to grips with the dirt and digging up the soil in the garden, I saw that the boulders on the lawn had started to move. Very awkward situation to be in, I can tell you."

Rose smiled.

"You always think I'll love these name-dropping stories of yours. But really? All of time and space, all those famous people you've met, and you think the one to blow my mind would be Alan Titchmarsh? For crying out loud Doctor, we've met Charles Dickens!"

The Doctor continued to display his infectiously charismatic smile at her. Rose couldn't help herself but delight at the silliness of the completely alien man before her, with whom she had been through so much.

"Let me guess," she said. "It turned out to be some sort of intergalactic traffic warden stuck like a million light years from home?"

The Doctor shook his head.

"Hmm no, that other warden was a real hassle though. Nah, it was just a pesky Tractator, which is basically like…" – he mimed with his hands searchingly – "like a giant woodlouse. They're dab hands with gravity, those Tractators are. George Lucas, eat your heart out! It was quite a shock for poor old Alan when he found himself floating thirty feet into the air, believe me."

Rose pondered for a moment.

"You definitely have friends in high places then."

The Doctor pursed his lips in excruciation. "Ooooh that was nasty. Don't do that… just don't…"

Rose laughed. "You love it really though!"

The Doctor gazed at her momentarily, then leapt to his feet, clapped his hands together and reached for the console to begin setting dials.

"Right then! *Molto bene*! Where to now, Ms. Tyler? The grass beaches of Florentina, the fire caps of Ry-Sis, or the diamond planet of Midnight? Choice is yours. Although, I think one lovely place to stop and relax is the Eye of Or—"

Rose slapped him across the hands, now hurriedly setting co-ordinates.

"Don't even go there. We've been through this."

The Doctor winced. "Ow! You take after your mother, you know that."

Rose wandered further round the console panels pensively, thinking over all of their previous adventures whilst playing with the zip of her Primark hoodie.

"Let's just go somewhere relaxing and maybe where I can get a tan quite easily?"

The Doctor thought to himself for a moment, before straightening his somewhat tight pinstriped brown suit that had moved out of shape whilst he had been sitting.

"All right then, I've got the perfect place!"

He began darting around the console making alterations, flicking switches, pulling levers as the TARDIS began its wheezing-groaning sounds of changing course and jumping time tracks.

"I was debating taking you to Apalapucia, voted number two planet in the top ten greatest holiday destinations in the galaxy for the discerning intergalactic traveller. But this… oh ho, ho… this is way better! *Allons-y*!" cried the Doctor.

The TARDIS began rocking about in its usual, wonderfully discordant flight, the green lights in the central console flickering in some kind of ethereal beauty and majesty both at the same time. Finally, the console column slowed as the sound of the TARDIS's vast engines ground to a halt. The Doctor looked over at Rose.

"We're here," he said excitedly, as he extended his arm out towards the TARDIS doors.

Rose grabbed her blue handbag from the hat stand as the Doctor pulled on his trench coat. Rose hurried over to the doors excitedly.

"This is always my bit from now on."

Rose thrust the doors wide open and stepped out. She was greeted by glorious sunshine – a vast city filled to the horizon with pointing spires and gothic church-like buildings as far as she could see through the cloudless sky. A bustling metropolis of market sellers, soldiers with musket rifles and businessmen were pursuing their various trades and duties in the large square in which the TARDIS had landed, although bizarrely no one seemed to have noticed the materialization of this strange blue box. To her left, Rose could see a forest of ships' masts filling the city's harbour. This was a city on the move, but still thriving under the heat. The Doctor closed the TARDIS doors behind them and scratched his head with a perplexed look on his face.

"Well, either the Chiming Bells of Kempor have had a major overhaul or—"

"We're in the wrong place." Rose sighed. "There's a first."

The Doctor wandered over to a nearby stall and flicked a glowing, green coin into the confused owner's open hands and picked up a newspaper.

"Fourteenth of June, 1752, *Pennsylvania Gazette*," he read aloud.

"So, we're in the States." Rose deduced. "I've always wanted to go. Mum and I have been saving up for years. That's why Mickey took extra shifts at Clancy's garage."

The Doctor grinned. "Of course, Philadelphia! That's where we are, a thriving city by this point. The most inventive place in the universe, the land of opportunity – America! Haha you lot, you're just amazing."

Rose nudged him in the chest.

"Oi you're with a British tourist, give us a shout!"

The Doctor frowned. "Britain – always a tougher audience to crack."

Rose nodded her head to indicate her agreement.

"So, why here? And more importantly what is that smell?"

The Doctor looked up from the paper. "Ah yes, well… see those horses over there?"

He gestured towards a nearby merchant ship unloading its cargo of horses in addition to other cattle. Rose pinched her nose between her index finger and thumb.

"Ah. Great. Now you see why I told you that we couldn't keep Arthur."

The Doctor was too busy drinking in their surroundings like a child at Christmas to concentrate on Rose's jibe.

"Come on, let's have a look around! There's so much to explore here. Seventeen fifty-two, it's absolutely vintage stuff. The prosperous land of America, opening its first ever hospital this year. Abolition of slavery underway. George Washington. Brilliant! And, of course, the man who effectively created your modern society – one of the Founding Fathers himself."

Rose looked puzzled. "Who?"

The Doctor tutted. "Take a guess."

Rose's face remained blank.

"Seriously, who?"

The Doctor grinned inanely. "You'll have to wait and see."

Rose laughed flirtatiously as she nudged the Doctor in the ribs.

"Oh come on, just tell me."

The Doctor smiled and led her by the hand running down a nearby cobbled street.

"Let's go meet him. The only trouble is finding him. City this big, the records that vague, it could be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Passing onto the next street, the Doctor collided head first with a portly man in his mid-forties coming from along the obscured junction to their right. The man fell onto his back in the middle of the road, the pile of papers he was carrying tumbling with him. The Doctor quickly helped the man up to his feet in an apologetic manner, clearly expecting a rancorous response.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he said as he brushed dirt off the man's overcoat. "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

The man waved these apologies away.

“It’s quite all right, friend,” he said as he straightened his wig. “I was buried in my work at the time. My outside concentration lapses.”

Rose was hurriedly picking up the scattered pieces of paper from the ground before handing them back to the man.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He smiled at Rose before turning an inquisitive stare at her. “My, you are a pretty little thing aren’t you?”

The Doctor squinted at the man standing in front of them now sifting through his documents. A look of dawning realization slowly appeared across his face.

“Ah! Of course, my head is so old and stupid!”

He wandered behind the blushing Rose to gaze at the man over her shoulder.

“You know the bloke I was telling you about just now?”

Rose gasped. “Now that is odd.”

The man’s expression turned to mystified confusion.

“I’m sorry, but have we met before, good sir?”

The Doctor sauntered up to the man and stretched out his hand, waggling his fingers jovially.

“Put it there, Mr. Franklin.”

Illustration by Jon Wesley Huff

The Doctor strutted ahead with Benjamin Franklin, beaming ecstatically whilst Rose struggled to keep up with her overly enthused companions.

"This is brilliant! I've always wanted to meet you Ben… if I may call you that?"

Franklin's brow furrowed further. "I think Mr. Franklin is acceptable for now."

The Doctor's grin was dashed momentarily, and Rose quickly acknowledged this.

"So, what are you doing here in Philadelphia, Mr. Franklin? Looks like you aren't a local."

Rose indicated towards the map of the city that Franklin was holding amidst the plethora of papers in his hand. Franklin looked down his protuberant nose at Rose, appreciatively drinking in this strange young woman's unconventional appearance.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have lived in this city for almost thirty years. I just happen to have a few minor difficulties with directions."

The Doctor coughed. "I've noticed."

Franklin ignored him.

"I am here on the strictest scientific business. I can't discuss it with the public just yet, but I can tell you that I will be conducting a highly important experiment tomorrow with the help of my colleague."

As Franklin became engrossed in his papers again, Rose leaned in to the Doctor and whispered, "Wow, lays it on thick doesn't he?"

The Doctor shook his head.

"He has every right. Ben's kite experiment, proving that lightning is a form of static electricity, will revolutionize the world and provide electricity for modern civilization. Even if he does think of himself as a bit of a ladies' man a *little* too much."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Clearly," she murmured.

The Doctor coughed. "Franklin will be responsible for you charging your phone, switching on the telly, putting milk in your mum's fridge."

The Doctor, Rose and Franklin finally emerged onto a street dominated by a redbrick mansion at the centre. Franklin turned abruptly to the Doctor and Rose.

"Well, here I must leave you. It was a pleasure to meet you, even if it was through somewhat unorthodox circumstances." He glared slightly menacingly at the Doctor. "Good day to you."

The Doctor's brow furrowed and he raised his hand in the air like an inquiring school child as Franklin turned to leave.

"Just a sec… It's not good old Professor Deane that you're conducting this experiment with?"

Rose gave the Doctor a puzzled expression as Franklin retraced his steps back to the Doctor and Rose.

"How do you know that?" Franklin demanded accusingly.

The Doctor sniffed and produced the psychic paper from inside the pocket of his trench coat.

“It’s just that Rose and I were due to take up lodgings with Mr. Deane upon our arrival to Philadelphia, as part of our stay. We’re part of a scientific ethical standards committee. We have to oversee whether your and Professor Deane’s experiment meets the criteria set by our health and safety regulations.”

Franklin frowned as he studied the Doctor’s seemingly immaculate credentials.

“He never mentioned that he would be having guests during the time of our experiments. This is most unprofessional! Our experiments are meant to be conducted under the strictest secrecy.”

The Doctor waved these protestations away as he folded the psychic paper inside his pocket.

“I know, I know. But our organization operates through impromptu visits.”

Franklin’s brow furrowed even further.

“Lord have mercy, this sort of thing would never have happened to me if I were taking residency with Dr. Bond, as I did last year. Still, if you’re coming too then we’d better get a move on.”

The Doctor smiled back at Franklin, as he and Rose followed him up to the largest house situated in the middle of the street lined with gothic buildings. Rose mouthed the words “What are you doing?” to the Doctor as they ascended the steps up to the black wooden door; Franklin sounded the knocker. The Doctor gave Rose a thumbs up and held up the psychic paper silently to her, on which Rose made out the words: “I read the name and address of Jeremy Deane, Franklin’s sponsor and scientific colleague, upside-down on Franklin’s notes. If in doubt, I always improvise. Plus, it’s Ben Franklin.”

Rose rolled her eyes at the Doctor just before the door to the house swung open to reveal a short maid with her blonde hair tied up in a tight bun. Rose couldn’t help noticing how pale she seemed. Her hands were also tinted a dirty, charcoal colour.

“My name is Mr. Franklin. Your master, Professor Deane, is expecting me.”

The maid returned a vacant expression before replying “Indeed. Please do come in, Mr. Franklin. Professor Deane is out at the moment, but he should return within the next few hours.” She turned to the Doctor and Rose. “And you are?”

Franklin flapped his hand impatiently at the maid before the Doctor could reply.

“They’re a Scientific Ethical Standards Committee. Don’t worry, they’re with me. I presume that you have rooms available.”

The maid gave a cursory examination of Rose before passing onto the Doctor, from whom she could not withdraw her stare.

“Yes, we do in fact have four guest rooms prepared at all times. If you would all like to follow me this way. My name is Katherine, and I shall be at your disposal at any hour of the day should you require me.”

She led the Doctor, Rose and Franklin through the front entrance into an enormous lobby lit up by a glistening chandelier, the like of which Rose hadn’t seen since she and her mum used to flick through estate agent advertisements of dream homes in the back of *The Sun*. Katherine led them up a wide opening set

of marble stairs, up to a long, red-carpeted landing leading to a corridor further along the left-hand side of the house, where the four guest rooms were situated.

"Your equipment and other belongings you sent ahead yesterday have been placed in your room, Mr. Franklin. I hope that you all enjoy your stay here. Dinner will be served downstairs in the dining room at six o'clock."

Katherine turned slowly around, and Rose noted how cold and jarring the words seemed to tumble out of her mouth, like confetti at a funeral. Rose also found it hard to not pay attention to the infrequency of Katherine's blinking – about only once every thirty seconds. She turned to indicate this to the Doctor, but he and Franklin had already retired to their rooms for the rest of the afternoon.

Katherine wandered back downstairs, her hand brushing down the handrail as she headed into the kitchen where the other two servants there, Agnes and Seymour, were busy preparing that evening's meal. They turned from their activities to acknowledge Katherine's suddenly delighted expression.

"He's here!" Katherine giggled. "The Doctor is here."

Rose tried her best to stifle a burp that would have reverberated around the many peculiar trinkets displayed in Professor Deane's study. The meal that evening had consisted of a large steak, served with a delicious chimichurri sauce, and then followed up by a whole lobster each, sent specially from Maine. The Doctor had kept kicking Rose from underneath the table throughout the meal to remind her of her manners. Rose had glumly obeyed by swallowing down all of the courses that the similarly taciturn servants had presented to Franklin, the Doctor and her in the absence of Professor Deane that evening.

Rose knew it was risky for her and the Doctor to be caught in the master of the house's workroom during the night. Especially after Franklin had retired to bed after a minor bout of indigestion, with still no sign of Deane. The Doctor aimed his sonic screwdriver at the locked wooden study desk he had been studying and it swung open. Piles of papers billowed out of it, trickling onto the floor at Rose and the Doctor's feet.

"He really needs to get more organized," Rose whispered.

The Doctor began to sort the papers into neat piles on the desk, placing a pair of spectacles on his face and sitting down in Deane's ornate wooden chair.

"I'll have a look through this, see what our dear Mr. Deane is up to. Funny how he's never popped up in the history books next to Franklin's name. You go and have a snoop around upstairs, see what you can find."

Rose mimed a military salute at the Doctor before leaving through the study's open door. She wandered down the dimly lit corridor to the east wing of the house. Katherine had refrained from showing the travellers that area of the building, having dismissed it as undergoing "major refurbishment" in the absence of their master. Rose made her way through another drawing room located down a second passageway that opened out onto the east wing.

She flung the final door open triumphantly to reveal a small room filled with square objects all draped over by white sheets. As the creaking of the opening door subsided, Rose became aware of a gradual moaning noise, emanating from each of the draped objects placed haphazardly around the room. Rose cautiously sidled up to the nearest object and reached out to pull the drape off. She covered her mouth with her hand in horror. Underneath the sheet, inside a small metal cage, was a cowering figure curled up in a ball. The naked figure was extremely thin, a man with a bald head, greying skin and strangely burnt hands. His large, oversized blue veins were throbbing rhythmically like a heartbeat, and he moaned in extreme agony. Rose leaned in closer.

"Oh my God. Don't worry, we'll get you out of there."

She looked around at the rest of the objects and wondered if they all contained these horrifying mutated creatures, living in this terrible, atrophying condition. In the process, Rose's eyes made contact with a set of stairs at the back of the room. She headed over to the stairs and began to ascend the dark curling passageway. Rose reached the top of the stairs where a metal door opened out onto the roof. She tried the handle, but it remained firmly locked. She needed the Doctor's sonic screwdriver. Rose headed back down the steps quickly and tiptoed back through the room of mutants, gently replacing the draped sheet over the cage she had unveiled. Upon returning to the study, Rose found the Doctor still engrossed in the papers, wearing a perplexed look on his face.

"These calculations make absolutely no sense. The geometry, the current, the weather conditions – none of it. I haven't been this bamboozled since I was asked to review Peladonian legislation at the behest of the Galactic Federation."

"Doctor, I found some cages in the back of the house," Rose interrupted. He turned to look at her.

"And, what's inside them?" he asked, acknowledging Rose's clearly shaken expression.

Rose drew breath to answer, but as she did so, the pair heard footsteps heading along the corridor outside. The Doctor hurriedly sealed Deane's study desk shut with his sonic screwdriver and bolted towards the open door, grabbing Rose's hand as he did so. The pair tiptoed back to their respective rooms, Rose mouthing the words "I'll tell you in the morning" at the Doctor, as both travellers closed their doors just as Katherine stepped into view, a look of fury in her eyes.

The next morning, Rose ran her hand along the curved bookshelf, as she eyed each of the intimidatingly large books stacked along it. Part of her half-expected to find some kind of book lever that would reveal a secret passageway leading to further mysteries within Deane's house. But she promptly dismissed this notion, having watched too many *Scooby Doo* cartoons on Saturday mornings. As Rose exited the library, she observed that the corridor that led away from the room, down towards the west wing of the house, was substantially wider than the one she had traversed in the east wing during the previous night. It puzzled Rose still

further upon discovering a small, metallic manhole located in the centre of the corridor. The wooden panels creaked as she walked up to the manhole. Rose grasped the handles with both hands tightly before turning it counterclockwise. It opened to reveal a ladder descending into pitch-darkness. A foul aroma filled Rose's nostrils, and she spluttered in shock at the smell. The manhole clearly led down to the sewers beneath the city.

Rose returned to the library to fetch a lantern and lit it with a match. She held the lantern aloft with one hand as she descended the rungs of the ladder down into the sewers. Rose was lost in a quagmire of sensation as the foul odour permeated around her. She wandered along the stone path to the right of the flowing river of sewage for about a quarter of a mile until she came to an ominous circular door, with metal girders protruding along its side. There seemed to be no obvious way of opening the door so she felt all around it, trying to search for some hidden entrance. This exploit proved fruitless and so she turned to report it to the Doctor. But in that instant, she made eye contact with Katherine.

The Doctor peered over the metal conductor in puzzlement whilst Franklin continued to berate his scientific partner.

"I knew it!" Franklin roared. "I knew that he wanted to take all the credit for himself. He always was a selfish boar. I had to supply almost all the calculations myself, you know."

The Doctor tried his best to calm Franklin.

"Hush, Ben. Yes, I know that what he's done is pretty bad form, but Deane has no right to publish the experiment. You have that journalist waiting on hand and foot for you at the *Gazette*, or hands and knees might be a more appropriate expression knowing you, you old fox…" He winked at Franklin.

A smile momentarily flickered across Franklin's face before the Doctor returned to his examination, pointing his sonic screwdriver further inside the blinking metal box he had just unearthed from beneath the mess of wires before him. The Doctor's brow continued to furrow even further.

"This can't be possible. Technology like this isn't due to appear on this planet for at least another five centuries."

Franklin raised a hand in the air to silence the Doctor.

"Doctor, I'm sorry… but another five centuries? You're speaking as if you were some mad fortune teller."

The Doctor snapped around.

"Oi! Don't dis fortune tellers, Ben. I've met enough of them now to learn that pooh-poohing a fortune teller earns you a one-way ticket to disasterville."

He paused.

"So, if this technology is clearly not of terrestrial origin, then who brought it here and why?"

Suddenly, the Doctor's eyes widened as realization began to trickle into his expressive face.

"Oh, my head is so thick! How could I possibly have missed it?"

Franklin leaned over the Doctor.

"Missed what?"

"It all makes sense. The burn marks on the hands, the irregular weather patterns, and the tech here… all pointing to…"

He turned sharply to Franklin.

"Rose."

He leapt to his feet and hurtled back towards the door to the roof, Franklin following in hot pursuit.

"But Doctor, you haven't explained – what does it all mean?" he called out.

"Oh Ben, if I had time to stop and have existential chitchats, I'd be here all day," he cried as he descended the stairs.

The Doctor and Franklin paused by the cages containing the mutants, the Doctor running his hand along the side of one of the male's cages.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. But we'll do everything we can to reverse this."

After making their way back to Deane's study, the Doctor took out and put on his spectacles. His pulled out a blueprint of the roof's spire from beneath the mass of papers and straightened it out on the desk.

"Look, there you see!" He pointed at the spire's material specifications. "Poltrinium. Only found on one planet within travelling distance of around two hundred light years. The perfect conductor for the approaching storm."

Franklin gazed down at the blueprint.

"A conductor for what? Electrical currents?"

The Doctor stared at Franklin. "A very different type of electrical current. A sentient one."

Franklin blinked. "A… *sentient* electrical current."

The Doctor nodded sagely.

"It must have transmitted itself down during the earlier storms and transferred into a corporeal host. It manipulates the electrical impulses of the human brain, turning its victims into mindless drones. That's what I gathered when I studied those poor creatures in the cages that Rose showed us earlier."

On the desk, he noticed a portrait miniature of Professor Deane with whom the Doctor presumed were now his estranged wife and children.

"That explains the burn marks on the back of the servants' hands," Franklin added.

The Doctor nodded. "A symptom of high-voltage electrical currents passing through human tissue. Barbecue."

Franklin still looked confused. "But, why then was I summoned? If this creature has already amassed some human shapes…"

The Doctor peered out of the window overlooking the city skyline. He noted that dark grey clouds were rolling in on the horizon. A new gale was brewing.

"Because it must need you, Ben. It needs your mind… your intellect. Their plan must be to substitute your neural electrical impulses with their own essence. And what's the perfect time to choose to do it? During the greatest lightning storm this city has ever known, on the day that you conduct your greatest experiment yet…"

He looked down at Franklin's open bag on the floor. Perched on top of the pile of clothes and reels of string and wire sat the kite, the most important kite ever made. Franklin's eyes were now wide with shock.

"They want to take all the credit for my work?" he finally roared.

The Doctor brought the palm of his hand up against his face.

"What is it with the academics? It's all fame, fame, fame. No Ben, they literally must require you. Your brain."

The Doctor tapped his index finger against the side of Franklin's head. Franklin appeared even more shaken.

"But, what for?"

At that moment, the door to the study swung open to reveal Katherine, flanked on either side by two burly footmen. Katherine was wearing a callous smile on her face.

"That is precisely what you are about to discover, Doctor."

The Doctor and Franklin struggled against their captors while being dragged down the basement shaft of the house. The Doctor presumed from the ever-decreasing quality of the smell around them that these drones were taking them to the sewers.

"You know, sewers are not really the most original place to have a dodgy underground lair. You probably should have just gone for a fluffy white cat and a leather chair instead," he said.

Katherine wheeled round.

"Silence," she commanded.

Franklin and the Doctor were led trudging through the sewers along a long tube that eventually opened out into a vast open area with high ceilings, about thirty feet across. At the centre of this was a selection of cages like the ones seen in Deane's house, only these didn't contain mutant experimentations – these had real people inside them. Another human drone stood on guard. The Doctor quickly distinguished Rose amidst the eight cages and struggled even more against his bonds.

"Rose!" he cried out.

Rose looked up from the cage and wrestled with the bars.

"Doctor, I tried to stop them. They're being controlled by some kind of electric thing. You can see it moving around their hands. They want Franklin."

The Doctor nodded. "Yep, got to that bit, cheers."

The Doctor felt his sonic screwdriver being removed from his pocket before he was thrown into the cage next to Rose's. Katherine leaned against the bars of the Doctor's cage.

"A Time Lord is always best contained," she snarled tauntingly.

Rose looked over at the Doctor.

"What are they Doctor? What's inside them?"

The Doctor looked stern. "A gestalt alien entity – a hive mind if you like. It's collective intelligence forms one single electrical parasitic organism. They

need human bodies to survive." He looked over at Katherine. "But they have a very inconvenient sell-by date, don't they?"

Katherine looked angrily back at the Doctor. "We are trying to perfect the human forms to prevent any further abnormalities."

The Doctor sniffed. "Doesn't seem to be working very well from the look of those rejects you've got caged up in Deane's house. And you couldn't just chuck them in the sewers, could you? The locals would see the greying skin and wonder what was going on here. So you keep them incarcerated like battery hens."

A stout man with a long flowing white wig suddenly emerged from the shadows. As with the other surrounding drones, electrical bolts were reverberating around his twitching fingers.

"Deane. You utter swine!" Franklin cried as he tried to run towards the arrival, before being restrained by one of the footmen again. The figure's lip curled malignantly.

"But now we have Franklin, all of our problems will shortly be resolved," Deane said.

The Doctor slapped his hand across his brow.

"Of course, you need Franklin to become the control node. His great mind will form the nucleus of the hive. To lead you in what I presume will become your conquest of Earth?"

Deane nodded. "Precisely, Doctor. And now with the eye of the storm a matter of minutes away, I think that it is time that Mr. Franklin became indisposed. I apologize for my absence as a host to you."

Rose laughed. "It's okay, the food could have been better, but apart from that you did all right."

Deane and Katherine turned to walk back through the sewers. The two footmen grabbed Franklin and picked him clean off the floor before carrying him towards the metal door. Franklin continued to kick and scream at his captors.

"You can't do this to me! Do you know who I am?"

The huge metal door slowly closed behind them, sealing off the expansive room from the sewer leading back to Deane's house. Rose turned to the Doctor.

"So, what's the plan?"

The Doctor shrugged. "No idea."

"What? But you always have a plan!"

The Doctor shook his head. "Not this time, I'm as stumped as you."

Rose took a few moments before she mustered the words to speak again.

"How does that thing, the Hive, know you?"

The Doctor sat up again.

"Well, I encountered it a long time ago on a planet where all life existed as electrical impulses. When human colonists eventually arrived on that planet, the electrical hive organism drained all their power to try and weaken the colony before it attacked with its amassed drones. I managed to stop it just before it was about to annihilate the last of the colonists."

Rose continued to stare at him. "What did you do?"

“Short circuited them – how else do you defeat something made of electricity?” He looked over at the metal door. “Trouble is, the one person who could help us in that department is currently being carted off to destruction.”

The Doctor suddenly wheeled round sharply to look at Rose. He then mouthed the words “I’ve got an idea” through the bars of the cage to her. The Doctor whistled at the nearest drone standing about seven feet away from their cages.

“Oi, you! Yes, I’m talking to you. I’m formally requesting a better quality of cage. Do you realize how inconvenienced I will be to your plan when Katherine finally realizes that I have a far greater knowledge than even Franklin about this area of science that you require? I can spend a lot of time shouting and even singing you know – I’ve got exceptional lungs, me. Pavarotti used to give me three lessons a week.”

The Doctor suddenly broke into glorious, operatic song. The drone’s features furrowed with the urge to frown, Rose assumed.

“Remain silent,” it ordered.

The Doctor ignored this command, breaking into yet higher decibels. Rose had to put her fingers in her ears, the sound was so piercing. A blue glow emanated from the breast pocket of the drone’s jacket. Electrical bolts suddenly surged out of the drone’s body, causing the drone to let out a deafening scream. It slumped to the floor, and the sonic screwdriver clattered to the floor out of the drone’s open top pocket. The sonic rolled towards the Doctor and Rose’s cages. The Doctor reached through the bars of the cage and grabbed the device.

Rose looked over at the Doctor in bewilderment. “What did you do?”

The Doctor cleared his throat. “The sonic resonance of my singing triggered my screwdriver in that drone’s pocket, short circuiting the current flowing through its physical mass. Symbiotic controls always come in handy. It’s a nasty time to be an electrically charged drone. Houdini wouldn’t be proud of me, but then again, I did give him my cold.”

The Doctor pointed the screwdriver at his cage and then Rose’s, causing them both to swing open simultaneously. After emerging, the Doctor placed his hand over the lifeless drone’s face and closed its eyes with his fingertips.

“I’m sorry.”

The Doctor turned to examine the other six cages, all containing cowering people about to be prepared for augmentation. He aimed his sonic screwdriver at the enormous metal door to the sewers causing it to click and swing open ominously before turning to do the same to the cages, which all opened in quick succession.

“You people need to get out of here, right now! Head to the surface and get to shelter, quickly!”

The Doctor and Rose stormed into Deane’s study, and the Doctor immediately proceeded to fling papers in the air, frantically probing through the mess of documents.

“Doctor, what are you looking for?”

The Doctor turned to look at her. “Franklin was a scientific genius; he came up with loads of new, bold, innovative ideas. But he also performed experiments based on the ideas of other inventors. One of which was the Leyden jar: a device that stores static electricity between two electrodes on the inside and outside of a glass jar. Although, you probably know it better as the battery, as Franklin first coined the term.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “So, if we can make our own battery…”

“…And attach it to Franklin’s kite and fly it during the lightning strike, we can use the Leyden jar to capture the electrical essence of the Hive inside it,” the Doctor finished.

The Doctor continued to search the pile of trinkets that had amassed next to the papers.

“Trouble is, where did Franklin keep his prototypes?”

He thought for a moment.

“His trunk! Franklin mentioned to me that he keeps things at the bottom of his trunk beneath his stockings, where his wife would never find them.”

The Doctor darted out of the study and into Franklin’s room. He flung open the trunk and began throwing out wigs, waistcoats, ties, boots, knee breeches and finally stockings from within. At last, the Doctor found what he was searching for and he let out a triumphant cry.

“Haha! This is it, Rose!”

The Doctor turned the jar around in his hands. Metal foil was cemented to the inside and the outside surfaces. A metal terminal was projecting vertically through the jar lid to make contact with the inner foil. Rose studied it, clearly impressed.

“That’s the first battery?”

The Doctor nodded his head. “Well, yes… well, no… well, one of them at least… Anyway, we need to find Franklin.”

The Doctor ran out of the room and picked up Franklin’s kite from inside Deane’s study and dashed back over to the open door. He headed towards the stone passageway that led to the roof, Rose following close behind.

Franklin tried to wrestle with the tall metal spire from the top of the building to which he was trussed up like a turkey.

“You’ll never succeed,” Franklin called out to Katherine and Deane, who were now standing in the pouring rain and gazing out across at the black clouds and lightning bolts that were creeping ever closer. The pair of them ignored Franklin’s protestations; they were too engrossed in the final stage of their plan. Franklin turned his head to look up at the sky, the rain shooting down onto his round face and trickling down his mountainous cheeks.

“I’ll be with you soon, O Lord.”

But at that instant, the wooden door to the roof swung open to reveal the Doctor and Rose. Franklin immediately recognized the objects that the Doctor was holding.

“No, Doctor! You can’t do it, it will kill you.”

The Doctor turned to Franklin. “I’m sorry, Ben, but I can’t let them harm you. History has to remain intact.”

The Doctor began tying a wire from the kite to the Leyden jar in his hands. Rose tried her best through the pouring rain to keep a tight grip on the rope that ran from the kite all the way down through the roof’s passageway.

“You escaped?” Katherine demanded.

“Apparently,” the Doctor remarked. “Looks like your species isn’t as water resistant as you first thought. Which reminds me,” – he clicked his fingers and pointed at the sky – “what lovely weather we’re having.”

Katherine looked back at the Doctor to acknowledge this.

“There is a minor abnormality in the genetic structure of some of our drones, one which we shall rectify in order to attain the higher evolutionary echelon achieved by myself and Professor Deane. I assure you that the Professor and I remain internally unaffected by the water solution. As will the control node.”

She nodded in the direction of Franklin.

“And now, it is time for us to dispose of you.”

The Doctor shook his head at them. “You never learn, do you?” He turned to Rose. “Now, Rose!”

Rose let go of the rope and the kite in the Doctor’s hands flew upwards into the air, the coil of wire attached to the Leyden jar spooling up to the kite as it did so. The kite was buffeted around by the violent storm, lightning bolts striking down at all angles. The deafening roar in the clouds seemed to emulate the anger on Katherine’s face.

“What have you done?” she screamed as she and Deane charged towards the Doctor.

Katherine reached out and grabbed the Doctor by the shoulder. A lightning bolt struck the centre of the kite, sending electrical pulses down towards the Doctor, Deane and Katherine. The three of them yelled out in agony as the electrical current surged through them. Katherine and Deane’s screams surpassed the Doctor’s, and they fell to the floor and both lay still. The Doctor stood shaking silently now, the Leyden jar wobbling around between his hands. Franklin gasped as Rose ran towards the Doctor.

“Doctor!” she cried.

The Doctor held up an electrified hand towards her to indicate distance between them.

“Stay back,” he ordered through gritted teeth.

The electricity continued to pour out of the Doctor and into the jar via the wires wrapped around his hands. At last, the pulse stopped and the lightning above their heads began to abate like soldiers retreating from a battlefield. The Doctor held up the jar to look inside. A bright blue electrical bolt was running continuously up and down the single thick wire between the positive and negative poles contained inside. Finally, the Doctor drew breath to speak.

“Ouch, I got rope burns off that kite.”

Franklin continued to shake the Doctor by the hand until Rose was convinced that it would fall off. She knew that it was not without precedent.

"Careful, I'm still fragile." The Doctor laughed.

Franklin ignored him. "My dear man, you have saved my life. Perhaps the life of everyone in the thirteen colonies… maybe the entirety of God's Earth."

The Doctor shook his head. "You saved them, Franklin. It was all your idea."

Franklin turned to look at Rose.

"And you, young lady, were most exceptional. I wish they made more of them like you."

Rose tutted as Franklin leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

"Oi, I know exactly what you meant by that, you dirty scoundrel."

Franklin looked hurt for a moment before Rose turned a knowing wink to him and he smiled in acknowledgment. He turned to the Doctor once again.

"But what about the Hive's other human drones out there?"

The Doctor sniffed. "I checked earlier. Looks like the collective essence of the Hive transferred from every single one of its hosts into the Leyden jar during the lightning strike. Rose and I popped in to see the cages in Deane's house. We lifted everyone out of the cages, clothed them and then placed them in the lobby. With any luck, they'll just believe that they were at some massive party hosted by Deane. Hopefully."

The Doctor glanced at his watch.

"Well, we'd better get a move on. Time and tide wait for no man."

Franklin cleared his throat. "There is just one disappointment from this whole affair."

The Doctor turned an inquisitive look back at Franklin. "And what's that?"

Franklin sighed. "I didn't get the opportunity to conduct my own experiment. Only your name will go down in history, Doctor."

The Doctor smiled before reaching inside his pocket and withdrawing a small green, crinkled piece of paper. He held up the American ten-dollar note; emblazoned across the front of it was Franklin, his protuberant nose completely unmistakable. Franklin's jaw dropped, a solemn look appearing across his face. Rose could almost make out tears forming in the man's eyes.

"Do you mean…?"

"Yes I do." The Doctor smiled.

"And that you are both from the future?"

"Yes, we are," Rose finished.

Franklin began to splutter in fits of laughter.

"Well, of all the revelations of today, that has to be the best one of them all!"

The Doctor produced another, larger piece of paper from within his coat pocket.

"Quite a staggering coincidence that I had this around before we first landed," he said as he unfolded it.

Rose made out the words *The Pennsylvania Gazette* across the top before the Doctor handed it over to Franklin.

“You never mentioned in your third-person account of your pioneering kite experiment that you yourself had performed it. Best not to mention that we were here, though. If anyone asks, you can tell them that we came and went like a summer cloud.”

Franklin had begun to thoroughly peruse the document when the Doctor snatched it back brusquely.

“Nu-uh, spoilers.”

The Doctor and Rose grinned as they set off back to the TARDIS and waved goodbye to Franklin.

“See you later, Ben. Go and make history.”

The People in the Wood

by Stephen Hatcher

Tom Barber turned over. The mattress, never the most comfortable at the best of times, was becoming more unyielding by the minute, and the pillow felt damp and smelled musty. Tom knew he needed to sleep, but he was struggling and the more he tossed and turned, the more awake he felt. He would need to be up early in the morning, but the chances of waking refreshed after a good night's sleep were becoming ever more remote. He was not quite fretting – he was far too old to fret, but he missed the comforts of home and family; missed his own bed and his own room; missed the warmth and the sounds of Jackie lying beside him. The emptiness was filled by a far too acute awareness of the noises around him. Every whisper of the wind or creak of a branch intruded like a discordant trumpet blast into what should have been the peace of his mind, each one of them taking him further from sleep.

The distant bleating of a flock of sheep, calling to each other in the darkness; the strange song of a night bird; the nearby snuffling of some foraging animal; the bark of a fox and the yelping replies of its young – or perhaps it was a family of badgers, or something else altogether; each cut like a knife through the silence. But silence was the wrong word; it was just too noisy to be called that. He struggled to sleep in a strange world of alien sounds – the sounds of the countryside each unfamiliar to his untrained townie ears.

Tom turned over again, and attempted once more to fall asleep. The small caravan groaned as it shifted position slightly in the wind. The same wind whistled and moaned as it blew around the site. Above all there was the sound of the trees, creaking branches and rustling leaves. The voices of the alien forest seemed to close in around him. Almost inevitably, the hooting of an owl carried on the wind, the eerie call merging with the whistle of the wind itself, such that Tom could not tell one from the other. Against the odds, Tom was beginning to doze. It was then that his last chance of sleep was snatched from him.

The gentle rocking of the caravan was replaced by a single violent shake, then stillness. Tom roused. Jack and Cyril too were awake. The caravan's fourth occupant Tony spoke without opening his eyes: "Go back to sleep, it was just the wind." The muttered words were barely audible. The three men each turned over and made to obey the suggestion, when the caravan gave a second shake, more gentle this time, but still enough to rouse the men again.

Tom lay on his back, wide awake. Something seemed wrong. Before he could complete the thought, the third and by far strongest shake hit the caravan, rocking it off its wheels and tipping it into the air. Thrown from their beds, the startled men were lying against what had been one of the van's walls, but which was now the floor. Another violent shake and the men found themselves falling as the caravan was again tipped over, completing a full 360 degree turn before landing more or less upright, although now at an unnatural angle. The four men, battered and bruised but seemingly miraculously free from serious injury, crawled out of the caravan door into the moonlight.

As Tom took in the scene of devastation around him, he became aware that Cyril and Tony were on their knees, their heads in their hands. Tom heard Cyril scream first and then Tony joined in. “Tony!” Tom shook his closest friend by the shoulders. “Tony, what’s up mate? What is it?” There was no reply, just the screaming – unearthly, penetrating screaming; prolonged screams of abject terror. It was as if Tony wasn’t even aware that Tom was there. Tony and Cyril screamed as if that was all they would do for the rest of their lives.

Tom turned as Jack shook him by the arm, wordlessly indicating for him to look around. He took in what was happening. Cyril and Tony were not alone. Crawling from the other vans, each of which had suffered similar fates to their own, men were screaming their lungs out – some on their knees, some rolling around on the ground, but all screaming.

The terrible sounds so filled the air that Tom did not immediately take in what he was seeing. The cause of the devastation was apparent: where the caravans had stood moments before, fully grown trees now formed a new skyline. Extraordinarily, impossibly, in the work of a moment the forest had reclaimed the site. As his fellow workers screamed uncontrollably, Tom and Jack gazed around them, seemingly the only ones unaffected. Uncomprehendingly, they struggled to take in their new surroundings. It was then that they too began to scream.

Liz Shaw smiled to herself as the UNIT jeep drove into the little market town of Wanbury. Little had been said on the drive up from London. With Sergeant Benton concentrating on the road, Liz enjoyed the green of the fields and the colours of the hedgerow flowers as she considered the unlikely turn her life had taken, since she had found herself unwillingly conscripted those few weeks ago. She went over the extraordinary things she had seen: Autons, Silurians, alien ambassadors, a special United Nations taskforce; if she had been warned what to expect back in Cambridge, she wouldn’t have believed a word of it. And here she was again now, off to investigate another mystery lurking in the English countryside, and to meet up again with the biggest enigma of the lot, the man who was in effect, her boss, albeit that it was she who enjoyed the title of UNIT Scientific Advisor.

The word “man” broke her train of thought. Was that the right word? He wasn’t human. She knew that much, but so little else about him. She rarely understood his thought processes, so different were they to her own. And yet perhaps not; she knew that he was, like her, a scientist – they shared that much. She knew too that, like her, he wasn’t working for UNIT by choice. He was trapped on Earth and had chosen to throw in his lot with Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and his men, in the hope that by doing so, he might find a way to escape. Similarly, Liz hoped that by doing what was asked of her, she might soon be allowed to return to Cambridge and to her research. She knew something else about the Doctor too: in the few weeks that they had known each other, she had come to trust him implicitly and to like him immensely, despite his occasional petulance, his overbearing arrogance, his regular rudeness to his

colleagues, his tendency to name drop – often citing the most unlikely friends and acquaintances… Liz couldn't help laughing quietly to herself, causing Benton to glance quizzically towards her. She smiled at the burly sergeant.

"Here we are, miss." The jeep turned onto the market place and pulled up outside the Green Dragon Hotel, in front of which Liz recognized the Doctor's yellow veteran car which he had taken to referring to as Bessie.

She went inside and into an oak-panelled room, which Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart had commandeered as a temporary HQ. The Brigadier, the Doctor and a man she did not recognize were standing around a table over which a large map was spread. The third man, whose smart suit, upper middle-class accent and military bearing spoke of public school, a wartime army commission and a career in the upper echelons of the civil service, was holding forth: "This is quite intolerable, Brigadier. There doesn't seem to be anything actually wrong with those men; I need them back on site."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Nothing wrong? What insufferable nonsense. Those men are traumatized, man. Have you actually seen them?"

"That is neither here nor there. What matters is that the motorway is completed before the end of the summer. If there are more delays, it could be next spring before it opens. Think of the additional cost. For every day that…"

"The cost? Oh, for goodness' sake. Do you people never…"

The Brigadier, noticing Liz for the first time, took the opportunity to interject: "Ah, Miss Shaw, you're here, good! Sir Gerald, allow me to introduce you to my scientific advisor. Doctor Shaw, this is Sir Gerald Carver, from the Ministry of Transport."

Hellos and handshakes were exchanged, and the Doctor took his chance to end the discussion. "Liz, how splendid to see you! Come and have a look at this." He motioned for Liz to follow and strode imperiously out of the room, up a broad wooden staircase and into a bedroom. Liz took in the scene. On the bed, his knees up to his chest in the classic foetal position, lay a man moaning incoherently as if in terrible pain. The Doctor took the man's head gently and turned it to face her. She could see his eyes, white, turned upwards in their sockets, and a trace of foam at his mouth. "They are all like it – unresponsive, catatonic even. They're all in a deep state of shock. No, it's more than that. Even now, two days later they are utterly terrified, completely paralyzed with fear."

It took no more than ten minutes to reach the motorway site. Leaving Wanbury in Bessie, Liz and the Doctor turned off the main road and took to a wide, rutted track, which Liz reflected would have been little more than a farm lane a matter of months ago, before the army of heavy machinery and the men who were constructing Britain's latest motorway had transformed it for its own uses. For now though, there was no sign of the unrelenting march of progress, no men or machines, no roar of engines to disturb the peace of this quiet corner of Danfordshire.

As Bessie came to the top of a slight incline, the vista changed immediately: green fields and ancient hedgerows gave way to a broad swathe of pale brown,

upturned earth and the black, pristine tarmac of the stretch of motorway, newly constructed but as yet unsullied by traffic, which stretched like a narrow scar on top of the bigger scar across the landscape. Beyond, the dark green of woodland still dominated as far as the horizon. Oddly, it was to this woodland, rather than to the construction work, that Liz's eyes were drawn. A vague awareness that something was not quite right dawned upon her. This then grew into a steadily deepening unease. Without understanding why, Liz felt herself becoming more and more absorbed by these anxieties… With an effort, she shook her head and looked away from the woods, towards the road, inside the car, anywhere… She became aware that the Doctor had been speaking to her, but she hadn't taken in a word.

"Sorry, Doctor, what were you saying?"

The Doctor hadn't noticed Liz's lack of attention. He glanced briefly at her, before returning his concentration to the road. "I was just saying, Liz," he continued with an almost childlike enthusiasm, "that we are going to have the new road to ourselves. By the end of the century, there will be eighty thousand vehicles a day on it, so it won't look like this for much longer."

Liz smiled. The unease had passed, leaving her puzzled as to its source.

At the end of the lane, Bessie passed through what had once been a farm gate, crossed the remnant of a field and mounted a gentle slope to join the motorway, the distinctive smell of freshly laid tarmac was all-pervasive. From here, it was a short drive to the point where the new road was cut off abruptly by the forest ahead. Liz had been expecting to see some sign of the road-builders' camp, but there was nothing.

"Where is the site then, Doctor? I can't see anything."

The Doctor indicated the thick line of trees that marked the end of the road. "That way! Until yesterday, the motorway continued another half a mile in that direction. Now that stretch has gone altogether – the forest has completely reclaimed it."

The Doctor parked the car and, with Liz following behind, set off into the wood.

The soft, mossy ground underfoot gave no indication that it had until very recently borne the hard surface of the new motorway, and there was no trace of the fresh tarmac smell that Liz had noticed earlier. As she and the Doctor made their way between the trees, the sounds, sights and smells were nothing but natural and surprisingly uplifting. The Doctor seemed to be infected with the same good spirits, and more than once caused Liz to smile to herself as she heard him singing what she recognized as snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan.

As they approached the camp, the mood darkened. Things were exactly as they had been described: overturned caravans wedged between the massive trunks of apparently ancient trees – trees that Liz knew had not been there before the incident. What did surprise her were the feelings of deep, unexplained dread that began to overtake her as she and the Doctor began to look around. Then she saw it. At least she thought she did. There, in the trees just beyond the caravans. But no, surely it was just a shadow. Again, over there, on the other side, a branch moved allowing her to see… but again no, just the wind. Her dread

began to turn into panic. This wasn't right, this wasn't how she reacted; she was a scientist after all. She worked by reason and analytical examination. The third time, she was sure it was a figure – there behind that oak and again in the undergrowth. She couldn't make anything out clearly, but she was sure it was there, and then she saw its eyes, shining yellow, boring into her…

She became aware that the Doctor was saying something, but she couldn't make out the words. What was wrong? Why couldn't she hear him? With a start, she realized that she was screaming at the top of her voice – a loud, protracted, agonized scream. Now she was on her knees with her hands over her face, still screaming, her eyes shut tight. She struggled to regain some self-control but it was beyond her. Then she felt strong, reassuring hands take hers and move them gently from her face. Still she screamed. Then she felt those same hands move to her temples, pressing gently but firmly. The Doctor was there, in her head. Now she heard his voice. But no, "heard" wasn't the right word; his words were right inside her.

Still she screamed, panic, fear, dread – but of what? Then she could make out those words. Her name, gently, soothing, oh so gently: "Liz… Liz… Everything is all right, Liz. There's nothing to worry about." She could no longer hear herself scream, and realized that she must have stopped. She opened her eyes and looked into that deeply lined face with those ancient, wise eyes; that kind, caring, unknowable face. She became aware of her breathing, slowing down, calming. The dread was gone, control had returned, she was herself again. The Doctor stepped back and, holding out a hand, steadied Liz as she got back onto her feet.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so, it was… Well, I don't know, I was just so scared – but I have no idea why."

"Yes, I know, I felt it too. Luckily my physiology makes me rather more resistant to that sort of influence."

"Influence? You mean…"

"Certainly, we were being attacked. Someone or something imposed that fear upon us. Whoever it was, they have formidable mental powers. Anyway, you should be okay now. I've been able to provide you with a good degree of shielding."

Liz remembered what she had seen. "I saw something, at the edge of the camp."

"Ah, you saw them too, did you? I think we may have seen the people who attacked us. They seem to have gone now though." He stared into the woods as if searching for a glimpse of their assailants, before turning again to Liz. "Let's see what else we can find."

Liz picked up an overturned stool and sat on it, watching the Doctor as he took a compact tubular object from his pocket. Holding it out in front of him, he began walking slowly around the camp, as if dowsing for water. The sonic screwdriver buzzed gently. The Doctor turned to the right and immediately the sound became angrier, more highly pitched. Without a word, Liz re-joined the Doctor and followed as he began walking towards a wide-trunked tree, on the

edge of the site. As they approached, the buzzing became louder and ever more insistent. The Doctor waved the device down and then up the trunk, and then down again, listening intently to the variations in pitch. Finally he settled over a fungus, about the size of a cricket ball, which was growing at the base of the tree. The Doctor pressed a button on the screwdriver, and the buzzing gave way to a gentle warbling whistle. As Liz watched, she could see clearly that this was no ordinary fungus. No ordinary fungus would be pulsating with a gentle green glow in the way that this was doing.

The "fungus" came away easily from the tree as the Doctor picked it up, his hand wrapped in a large silk handkerchief. The glow stopped immediately. The Doctor examined the object, turning it over to reveal what appeared to be a tangle of wiring. As Liz looked more closely, however, she could see that these were not wires, but something that resembled fine roots.

The Doctor prodded them gently with his pen. "Now that's very interesting. Have a look at this, Liz."

Liz looked more closely, then with a gasp, turned to the Doctor. "But this isn't natural. Somehow it's artificial. This is some sort of machine."

"Yes, Liz," – the Doctor rubbed the back of his neck as he spoke – "a machine, but a wholly organic machine. I think we have found what was causing your problems just now. This is something quite unique, some sort of psychic resonator, capable of intensifying feelings and emotions to an extraordinary degree, and all based on an organic technology, unlike anything else that you'll find on this planet."

"So, it's alien then?"

"That, my dear Miss Shaw, remains to be discovered." The Doctor put the device into his pocket and resumed his scan of the area. Almost immediately he found another of the devices, then another, and another, the line stretching away into the woods. "We can't do this on foot, Liz. Come on, we need the Brigadier's help."

The two-seater helicopter rose effortlessly into the sky. At the controls, Sergeant Mike Yates concentrated on taking the chopper safely above the roofs of Wanbury, before glancing at the passenger seated next to him. "Right, Doctor, where are we going?"

Over the noise of the engine, he heard the Doctor's voice in his headset: "I want to find out what these psychic devices are protecting, so let's fly over the woods and see if we can spot a pattern." The Doctor turned his attention to the box on his lap, from which the sonic screwdriver was protruding. One red light was lit and the box was emitting a steady beep. Within moments, as the chopper flew above the treetops, another light came on and the beeping quickened slightly.

"Round to the left please, Mike." The helicopter flew in a wide arc over the dense woodland, more lights coming on and the frequency of the beeping quickening and slowing as more of the strange organic machines made themselves known. The Doctor studied the device intently, making notes and

plotting a ring of points on a rough plan of the area. After some thirty minutes, Mike got the impression that the Doctor had got all that he needed, and he was expecting the instruction to return to Wanbury airfield. It was then that something seemed to catch the Doctor's eye.

"Mike, look over there. Do you see it?"

Mike looked in the direction the Doctor was pointing, deep within the circle formed by the signals that they had tracked and plotted. He could see nothing. "What am I looking at, Doctor?"

"There, Mike, down in the trees, it's a village."

Mike looked again, but could still see nothing. "Doctor, are you sure? I can't see anything. I… I…" A wave of nausea swept over him. Deep in the pit of his stomach he could feel it: fear, anxiety, call it what you want. "Doctor, I can't hold it – we're going down. We're going to crash!" As he said the words, the dread inevitability of their destruction seized him. At once, he felt himself pushed aside. Mike's head began to clear, and his calm and self-control returned. The Doctor had taken the controls of the helicopter. They were safe. "Thanks, Doctor," he said, resuming control of the aircraft. "That was odd. I think I'm okay now."

The Doctor smiled. "Okay, Mike, welcome back. You can take us down now."

They penetrated the forest, at first forcing their way through thick bracken and undergrowth, before coming upon the barely discernible path. It scarcely merited the name "path," being so narrow and overgrown as to be little more than a rabbit track, but Liz found that once they became used to it, she and the Doctor could follow it with little difficulty.

The Doctor spoke in hushed tones as they walked: "I know what I saw, Liz – it was definitely a village. The fact that Sergeant Yates couldn't see it convinces me even more that the answer to this mystery lies here, in these woods. This is one of the last remaining wildernesses in southern England, thousands of years old, possibly tens of thousands. And in all of that time, it has remained undisturbed – until now. Your motorway is changing all of that."

"My motorway? It's not…"

The Doctor ignored the interruption. "While the road is being built, the forest is disturbed. Some of it is destroyed, but all of it is disturbed. Who knows who or what is being disturbed with it? Who knows what creatures, people even, have been living here, cut off from civilization, from humanity, from the march of history, possibly for as long as the forest itself has been here. The construction work will no doubt move on, perhaps leaving this area in peace again, but for now the forest and whatever it holds are resisting – they are fighting back."

"Which is why I would have been happier if the Brigadier and some of his men had come with us." Liz reflected on the irony of what she was saying. She would have expected herself to be the last person to be wishing for military intervention, in almost any situation.

“That is exactly what we didn’t want.” The Doctor smiled grimly. “If we were to go charging into that village, throwing our weight around, the outcome could be disastrous. We need to talk to these people, find out who they are and what they want. Liz, the Brigadier understands that, which is why he agreed to wait for us to come back. We really don’t want a repeat of what happened with the Silurians.”

Liz nodded, but was still not entirely convinced. The pair continued silently. After a good hour’s walk, the path turned a blind corner and without warning, Liz and the Doctor found themselves entering a broad clearing, populated by a collection of wooden buildings. They paused to take in the scene. The buildings were mostly small huts, presumably dwellings of some sort, circled around a larger building, which looked like some sort of communal hall or possibly a chieftain’s hut. Liz could see no animals, nor any indication of agricultural activity. There was also no sign whatsoever of any inhabitants. The village appeared to be completely deserted.

Mike Yates walked purposefully across the car park at Wanbury Cottage Hospital. The Brigadier had insisted he be given the once over, but as he knew he would be, he had been passed fit for duty. This had been a waste of his time. The incident in the helicopter had been worrying – thank goodness the Doctor had been there. He had learned from that business on the island of Salutua that he could trust this strange time-travelling alien scientist, and now once again, his life had been saved by him. But that was over now, and Mike knew that the protection the Doctor had given him and the other UNIT troops would keep him safe. He was ready to get back to work.

It was as he turned into the high street that Mike began to feel the anxiety again. To be safe, he pulled over. Still it was there. He could feel the mental defences that the Doctor had given him being challenged. Still he remained calm; they were holding. Others were not so lucky. All around him, people had begun to scream and to fall to the ground, clutching their heads. A small blue car came careering down the street, its driver clearly under attack. It veered from side to side, before hitting an elderly couple, who had been sitting on a roadside bench. They couldn’t have survived the impact. Two more cars, a red estate and a white mini, both travelling at an alarming speed, crashed head on and erupted into a fireball, certainly killing all the occupants, not to mention the family group that had been lying screaming too close to the collision to have escaped involvement. An almighty crash heralded the impact of a lorry into a chemist shop window. Without warning, a middle-aged, smartly dressed man, his eyes staring wildly, threw himself onto the bonnet of Mike’s jeep. He heard the words, “They’re here already! You’re next!” Then the man fell silent, clearly dead. The sergeant watched in horror as more and more of the people of Wanbury stopped screaming and fell silent. He leapt from the jeep and checked the nearest person to him, a young mother, whose infant child lay crying beside her. Dead! Wanbury was under a lethal attack.

From an upstairs window of the Green Dragon Hotel, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart watched the unfolding horror in the market place. He heard the phone ring and was aware of Corporal Bell's voice as she handed it to him. "It's Mike Yates, sir."

"Hello, Sergeant…? Understood, yes… Get back here as soon as you can. We can't wait any longer."

The Doctor and Liz exchanged a glance and entered the village, the Doctor taking the lead. They paused at the entrance to the first hut. Peering inside, Liz could make out rough wooden objects, which she took to be furniture – what looked to be a straw-covered bed or bench and a small table. There was nothing that could be called modern amenities, even using the broadest definition of the word "modern." Without a word they moved on to the next hut, which they found to be identical to the first. Again, without comment, they began to move towards the larger, central building.

Approaching the doorway, Liz became suddenly aware of a suggestion of movement at the periphery of her vision, then another and another. It seemed to happen all at once: shimmering as if in a heat haze, figures emerged, apparently from nowhere. It was, Liz reflected, as if they had always been there, but that she had just not noticed them before. As she watched, the figures became clearer, more defined. They were humanoid in form, but clearly not human. They came into focus, and Liz could see the creatures properly for the first time. A pale yellow in colour, tall and spindly, they were hairless with golden glowing eyes. Although they appeared to be naked, Liz could see no indication of gender. Liz could make out at least fifty of the creatures emerging from all directions, encircling her and the Doctor, and cutting off every avenue of escape.

The Doctor stepped forward, offering a handshake and speaking in a gentle friendly tone: "Hello, I'm the Doctor, this is Miss Shaw. Who are you?"

At first the creatures did not respond, ignoring the Doctor's proffered hand. Liz felt a strong sense of unease come over her mind, like a wave breaking on the shore. As if riding the crest of that wave, words came into her mind, without any of the creatures giving any indication that it alone was the speaker.

"Your question has no meaning; we are she who is here. You are the Outsider."

"Ah yes, well that is very true." The Doctor stroked the back of his neck. "Where are you from?"

"Again, this has no meaning. We are she who is here; we have always been she who is here."

"I see yes, I think I see. Tell me, why did you attack the outsiders?"

"We… attacked the Outsider to make her leave us alone. She hurts the trees, hurts us."

"But the outsiders don't even know you are here."

"She hurts the trees. We will stay here; we will be apart from the Outsider."

"The Outsider? Singular? I rather think that you are…"

"We are she who is here."

"Yes, quite so. And you will stay here. It seems to me that the outsiders… the Outsider must build her road somewhere else. I will do all that I can to keep her away from your trees."

Liz's unease became stronger. The voice in her mind continued.

"You are the Outsider. You are she."

The Doctor looked concerned. "Well yes I am, but I am not the one responsible for…"

"You are the Outsider. You must stop hurting the trees."

"Yes, of course, but it's not that simple. I will talk to…"

Liz felt the protective barriers that the Doctor had put in her mind fall before a sudden mental onslaught. She heard herself begin to scream as she fell to her knees. The Doctor seemed unaffected.

The words came again: "You are the Outsider. We must stay apart. You cannot leave here now; you must stop being."

Still screaming, Liz turned towards her friend. The Doctor's face began to contort with pain. She felt something else in her mind and realized that she had stopped screaming. The Doctor clutched his head and fell to his knees as Liz rose to her feet. She could now hear the Doctor's words too, directly in her mind, still calm and reassuring despite the pain that she could feel behind them: "I am only part of the Outsider. I can help. Stop this attack and let us leave.

"Liz, I can shield you, but only for so long. Go now."

"No, Doctor, I'm…" Liz felt immediately that her attempts to argue were only weakening the Doctor. Again, she felt her protection fail and she fell to her knees. Again, she felt the Doctor recover and her defences return. She rose once more to her feet, unsure whether to obey the Doctor and leave while she could, or to stay and help him.

Before she could make up her mind either way, the decision was taken from her, as the Brigadier, followed by Sergeants Benton and Yates burst through the crowd of creatures. Raising his pistol into the air, the Brigadier let off a single shot. The creatures shrank back at the noise.

The Doctor, still clearly in pain, turned angrily towards Lethbridge-Stewart. "Brigadier, this is not what we agreed. You were supposed to wait for us to return. Now for goodness' sake, put that gun away, before you cause any real damage."

"Sorry, Doctor, national security. I have a responsibility to…"

At that, Liz convulsed with pain. The anxiety, the fear, the panic were stronger than ever before. Through the agony, she could see that the three UNIT officers had been similarly affected. They too fell to the ground screaming, the Brigadier's gun dropping beside him as he fell. The Doctor seemed more in control, but nonetheless he was on his knees, clutching his head. The pain threatened to overwhelm Liz, leaving her unable to react to events as she watched the Brigadier, on the ground, groping for and retrieving his gun and levelling it vaguely towards their attackers. Liz heard the Doctor call out "Brigadier, no!" and then the crack as the shot was fired. The pain ceased immediately.

Liz looked up to see one of the creatures clutch its midriff and fall to the ground. As Liz, the Doctor and the three soldiers pulled themselves to their feet, a scream of pain filled the air as every one of the creatures, emulating their fallen colleague, clutched their midriffs and fell in the same way. The Doctor ran to the nearest of the creatures, crouched to examine it, then checked another before turning to look directly at the Brigadier.

"They're dead."

The Doctor continued to stare at Lethbridge-Stewart in horrified silence, but the Brigadier's concern was for his companions. "Miss Shaw, Benton, Yates, are you all right? And you Doctor?"

Liz and the two sergeants nodded distractedly, but the Doctor gave no response.

"Doctor?"

His reply came quietly, with more than a hint of disgust in his voice. "Well I hope you are proud of yourself, Brigadier. You've killed them all."

"Killed them? But I only shot the one."

"They were one shared consciousness, man. Injure one and you injured them all. Couldn't you have waited?"

"No, Doctor, I couldn't take the risk. People were dying"

"Ah yes, the proper military response; I've seen it before, remember."

Liz asked what they were all wondering: "Who were they, Doctor?"

"We'll probably never know. Perhaps aliens who came here long ago, perhaps an ancient native Earth species. Thanks to you, Brigadier, we'll never know. From their technology alone, we could have learned so much." He shook his head in horrified regret.

"Sir, look!" Mike Yates had been the first to notice. The bodies of the creatures were shimmering, disappearing before their eyes. Within seconds, there was nothing to suggest they had ever been there. With a roar like the sound of an earthquake, fully formed trees began to sprout from the ground as the forest reclaimed the village.

The Doctor began to shepherd his companions out of the disappearing clearing. "Come on, quickly, we need to leave". The Brigadier assumed the lead, followed by Liz, Yates and Benton, with the Doctor bringing up the rear, crashing along the narrow path, in their hurry to escape the oncoming tide of trees.

At the edge of the woodland, where the motorway ended, they were greeted by Sir Gerald Carver, anxious for news. "Brigadier, what did you find? What has happened?"

The Brigadier said nothing, shaking his head.

The Doctor turned to the Ministry man, unable or unwilling to disguise his contempt. "It's over, Sir Gerald. You can finish your motorway now."

Without another word, he turned his back on the company, walked over to Bessie, got in and sped away, heading towards who knew where. Liz watched him leave. She couldn't be entirely sure, she reflected, that any of them would ever see him again.

The Neither

by Ian Howden

The flat was Spartan, almost aesthetically so – the abode of someone who was not home a lot. However, that had changed: Mike Yates was a civilian now.

He sat slumped on the two-seater couch facing the black and white portable TV, which had been positioned on a wooden dining chair opposite, a mute companion now that its volume dial had been twisted down. But Mike wasn't watching anyway.

A photo album sat open on his lap, and he idly flicked through the pages with one hand, the other holding a glass containing a generous measure of Scotch. His expression was wistful as he gazed down at the neatly arranged photographs, snapshots of happier times and places.

He paused his page turning as one particular photo caught his eye: some function the UNIT staff had attended, the familiar faces smiling around the table as they put their meal on hold to pose for the camera. There was the Brig, in full regimental dress uniform, a smile quirking under his moustache; good old Benton sat on his left, looking awkward in his civvies; Jo Grant – Jo *Jones* – sitting on Mike's right in the picture, looking as swinging and groovy and lovely as she always did. And sitting at the head of the table, holding court as a raconteur like him rightfully should, a grinning Doctor, resplendent in his velvet jacket, frilly shirt and bow tie, holding up a glass of red wine in salute.

Mike smiled sadly and held up his own glass to return the salute, knocking back a gulp of whisky—

There was a knock on the front door and Mike lowered his glass, eyes narrowed suspiciously. He bowed his head back over the photo album and carried on flicking through it, steadfastly ignoring the increasingly insistent rapping.

His caller was as determined as him, however; an irritated frown creased Mike's brow and his lips tightened into a thin line. Sighing through his nose, Mike reluctantly laid the album down next to him and peeled himself off the couch, ambling into the hallway, glass still in hand. "All right, all right!" he called out wearily.

He opened the front door, discovering with no great surprise Sarah Jane Smith standing outside. Still sporting her boyish haircut, she nevertheless cut a feminine dash in that '20s retro-style gear that she favoured. She was also wearing a little more makeup than usual. He regarded her awkwardly, at a loss for what to say.

Sarah leaned forward. "It's usually customary to invite visitors in," she informed him in a mock conspiratorial tone. Mike realized he had been staring and blushed, Sarah flashing a mischievous grin. He stood aside and before he knew it, she breezed past him, plucking the glass from his fingers, disappearing into the living room before he could protest.

Sarah strode across the room, her trained eye taking in the album on the couch as she headed for the kitchen alcove. She promptly upended the glass into

the sink and replaced the cap on the bottle standing on the worktop, shoving it into the nearest cupboard.

"That very expensive single malt was a present from a friend," Mike protested feebly.

His uninvited guest whirled around to face him, the pointed chin of her heart-shaped face jutting out defiantly. "Then you need better friends," she told him bluntly.

"Look, Sarah, I appreciate what you're trying to do – really, I do. But I'd rather—"

Sarah folded her arms. "What? Continue to sit here alone, drowning your sorrows?"

Mike mirrored her defensive posture. "Well, yes, actually," he replied querulously.

Sarah made a scornful noise. "A far cry from the dashing young officer I first met."

"That's because I'm not an officer anymore." Mike bristled. "I didn't ask you to come here, Miss Smith, so don't you stand in judgement over me—" Realization dawned across his features. "You're deliberately trying to provoke me, aren't you?"

Sarah smiled innocently. "Is it working?"

Mike grinned despite himself and unfolded his arms. "Well, yes, actually."

Sarah's smile revealed itself to be the rascally grin it really was and she slipped past him, wandering into the living room and lifting the photo album from the couch. She curiously flipped through the first few pages, and then settled on the UNIT group photo he'd been looking at. She studied it for a moment or two with a faint smile, and then looked over at Mike who had followed her from the kitchen, her expression sincere.

"They're all worried about you, Mike," she told him, indicating the album. "I'm worried, too."

Mike shook his head. "There's really no need, I'm fine," he insisted, refolding his arms. "Far more than I deserve to be, really, considering what I did."

Sarah gazed sadly at him. "Friends forgive, Mike. And we're worried about you because you don't seem to want to move on with your life." She shrugged her shoulders with frustration. "It's like you're living in limbo, imprisoning yourself in this flat. You deserve better than that, Mike – your friends deserve better."

Mike looked miserable. "I don't know what to do, Sarah," he admitted. "UNIT gave my life structure, purpose, and after my breakdown, Operation Golden Age filled the void that was left." He gave a heavy sigh. "Now I have nothing to focus on, no direction and no outlet. You're right when you say I'm living in limbo – I'm a nothing person now, no use to anyone."

Sarah Jane set the album down and moved over to clasp his arms, gazing intently into his eyes. "You're of use to me, Mike – that's partly why I'm here tonight."

He regarded her warily, remembering that at heart Sarah was a journalist, and that he was a potential interviewee with a lot of secrets to expose. “What do you mean?” he asked cautiously.

“Get yourself cleaned up, have a shave and put on your best clobber,” she instructed him, “and I’ll show you.”

Sarah’s little sports car sped through the streets of London like a fever through the city’s bloodstream; the streetlight barely got a chance to reflect off its gleaming paintwork before slithering off to be left in its roaring wake.

She spotted a turnoff ahead and swerved into it, Mike bracing himself against the door. A short journey down a narrow road, and then Sarah brought them to a halt outside the gates of a rambling old building. “Chowdikar House,” she pronounced ominously. “Supposedly one of *the* most haunted houses in the country, the site of poltergeist activity, demonic possessions, suicides and suspicious deaths since the nineteen twenties.”

Mike’s eyebrows rose at this revelation, but quickly collapsed back down into a frown as he struggled to remember. “Chowdikar…” he muttered to himself, and then his eyebrows rose again along with the retrieved memory. “My grandfather was a governor in the Far Eastern colonies – the old buffer taught me a bit of the local lingo when I was a boy. ‘Chowdikar’ means tollhouse, or gatekeeper.” He looked at her, puzzled. “Why are we here, incidentally?”

“Because, Mike,” Sarah smiled impishly, “we’re going to a séance.”

Sarah’s car scrunched along the gravel driveway, parking in front of the house next to the other cars already lined up. Sarah got out first, taking a step back and standing with her hands on her hips as she gazed up at the dark, forbidding building that loomed over them, her expression one of determined defiance.

Mike unfolded his lanky frame from the passenger seat and got out, he too looking up at the frontage of Chowdikar House, albeit with much less enthusiasm. “You sure this is a good idea?” he asked over his shoulder, his breath pluming in the cold night air.

He heard her crunching footfalls as she came around the car to stand at his side; he was surprised – though not unpleasantly so – when she linked arms with him. “I’m sure it was a good idea to bring you,” she said. “I think objectivity will be a little thin on the ground tonight, so it’ll be good to have some backup. With your experience in identifying unusual phenomena, you’ll be able to sort out the luminous tambourines and table-rapping from the genuine – if any – paranormal activity.” She flashed him a winning smile and jerked her head in the direction of the house. “Shall we?”

She was direct, this one, Mike mused. Sarah was making no secret of the fact that, to a certain extent, she was using him, employing only a minimum of emotional manipulation to appeal to his ego, as a courtesy. After all the lies and deception of recent times, her frankness was refreshing; she might indeed be

using him, but it felt good to be useful again. “Yes,” he finally responded with a smile that, for the first time in a long time, did not feel forced or strained. “Let’s go in – it’s freezing out here.”

Sarah grinned and squeezed his arm, and then they both walked over to the house, stepping up onto the decrepit porch. The paint on the imposing front door was peeling, and the lion’s head knocker was pockmarked with rust; Sarah Jane took the initiative and reached up to haul the heavy knocker back, thumping it several times – the knocks pealed along the hallway beyond. Heavy footsteps approached, and then the door squealed open on rusty hinges, revealing a thickset man in an ill-fitting butler’s uniform. The scarred, broken-nosed face above the incongruous ensemble simply did not belong there; it was a face made for looming menacingly out of the shadows in some alley in the East End ganglands. He stared down at them from underneath his craggy brows, not breaking his taciturn silence, so instead Sarah decided to break it, tilting her chin as she unwaveringly met his gaze.

“Sarah Jane Smith,” she introduced herself, and then nodded to indicate Mike beside her, “plus one.”

The butler opened the door fully to admit them, his great Easter Island head slowly swivelling round as they squeezed past. He closed the door and turned to clumsily help Sarah off with her jacket; she just had time to pull her arms free of the sleeves before he turned to hang it on a coat stand near the door. Had she not, he might have hung her up whilst still inside it. Sarah Jane stuck her tongue out at him behind his broad back.

Mike had the good sense to quickly shrug out of his own suede jacket, ready to hand over to the butler when he lumbered over.

His duties dispensed with, the butler left them to exchange amused glances as he wordlessly walked away down the hallway to open a side door; sitar music, the chatter of the other guests and the clinking of their glasses briefly enlivened the dingy hallway. However, the butler quickly closed the door behind him as he entered the room beyond, as if concerned that the conviviality within would drain away into the darker recesses of the house.

Mike looked around whilst they waited: the interior of the house was as dilapidated as the exterior, but an effort had been made to clean it up and make it habitable, at least for tonight. Candelabra had been placed on what available surfaces there were, their glowing haloes not quite intersecting with each other and failing to warm the hallway completely.

Traces of previous occupiers remained: the last ones had been in the middle of wallpapering the hallway and stairwell, sometime during the sixties judging by the pattern, when they had abandoned their redecorating; there was an abrupt demarcation line between wallpaper and scraped plaster halfway up the stairs.

His attention was drawn back to the door along the hallway as it reopened. An attractive young woman around Sarah’s age emerged, her long, coppery hair drawn to one side and draped over her pale shoulder. Her other shoulder was swathed in the silk of her exquisite sari; its hem trailed along the floor, making her seem to glide as she came along the hallway towards them, arms opening as wide as her smile. “Sarah, you came,” she said delightedly, her rich voice filling

the hallway with far more warmth than the ambient candlelight. She and Sarah hugged, leaving Mike to stand awkwardly on the sidelines; Sarah and the woman parted but still clasped each other's hands, each taking the other in. Sarah then indicated Mike. "Mike, this is my friend Abigail Chalmers," she introduced. "Abby was my roommate at university. She's the one who invited us here this evening. Abby, this is my friend Mike Yates. I hope you don't mind that I brought him along."

Abby cast an appreciative eye over at Mike. "Of course I don't," she responded warmly, flicking a meaningful glance at Sarah. "Any friend of Sarah's is a friend of mine." She wafted over to him, gently clasping his arms and pecking him on both blushing cheeks. "Welcome, Mike." She waved a hand towards the open doorway along the hall. "Why don't you go and grab yourself a drink? Sarah and I will be right behind you."

Mike nodded and excused himself. Abby watched him go, leaning over to Sarah and quietly asking, "Where did you find him? He's adorable."

Sarah rolled her eyes in exasperation. "You haven't changed, have you? You were always trying to pair me off with someone when we were at uni."

Abby gave her a look of feigned innocence. "I only wanted you to have a bit of fun – you were always so studious."

"That's kind of what university is all about, studying," Sarah retorted. "Anyway, it's not like that with Mike – he's just a friend, that's all. He's had a bit of a hard time recently, and I thought a night out would do him some good."

Abby took Sarah's arm, a knowing smile playing on her ruby-red lips as she led her friend along the hallway. "Well, he's in for the night of his life tonight," she promised obliquely, her smile broadening as Sarah did a brief double take.

Back in the days when Chowdikar House was a grander place, the room in which tonight's guests were gathered would have been the drawing room; its current dilapidated condition had been artfully concealed by the hanging of diaphanous drapes and tapestries with astrological designs over the peeling, mould-encrusted walls. Burning incense sticks masked the smell of dampness, and various candelabra and solitary candles chased the prevalent gloom back into the far corners.

Mike had been disappointed to discover not a Ravi Shankar-style figure sitting cross-legged on a cushion plucking the strings of his sitar, but rather a battery-powered tape deck sitting on the table against the wall alongside the trays of sandwiches and canapés.

He hovered self-consciously near the table, nursing a glass of champagne that had just been poured for him by the brutish butler, who was now pouring out other glasses, his thick-fingered hand looking better suited to wielding a broken bottle than a magnum of champagne.

Mike was relieved when Sarah entered the room with her friend Abby, and they drifted over to join him; Abby took two glasses from the full tray set out by the butler and handed one over to Sarah. She then glanced around the room until she spotted the person she was looking for, smiling and waving over at them.

“Time to meet our host, darlings,” Abby announced and led Sarah away by the hand, Mike trailing behind them.

Standing in the centre of the room was a slight, fey man with long blond hair scraped back severely into a ponytail; he was wearing a silk jacket with a Nehru collar, and narrow-framed sunglasses shaded his eyes – an unnecessary affectation in a room lit only by candlelight. He was conversing with a couple of guests, but on Abby’s approach with Sarah and Mike in tow, the guests drifted away, no longer basking in the warmth of the host’s attention. “Justin, darling,” Abby began, ushering Sarah forward, “this is the dear friend I was telling you about, Sarah Jane Smith. Sarah, this is my other dear friend, the renowned—”

“Justin Becquerel, the famous psychic and medium,” Sarah interrupted, stepping forward and thrusting out her hand, which Becquerel shook lightly. “Yours is an interesting act, Mr. Becquerel. I think the last time I saw it was on the *Parkinson* show, when you were on with Oliver Reed. He seemed impressed.”

“You’re too kind, Miss Smith,” Becquerel responded with a dry irony, tilting his head back to regard her through the shaded slivers of glass hiding his eyes. “But dear Ollie doesn’t need much help in seeking out the spirits, now does he?” This elicited a polite ripple of laughter, but Justin’s attention was already elsewhere; he slipped his delicate hand free of Sarah’s grasp and floated forward to intercept Mike. “And who is this handsome specimen?” he enquired, an eyebrow rising above the frame of his sunglasses.

Mike cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Uh, Mike, Mike Yates – pleased to meet you.” He offered his hand, which Becquerel clasped with more enthusiasm than he did Sarah’s. “Charmed, I’m sure,” he purred. Mike extricated his hand from the grip and glanced around, desperate for a distraction. “So this Chowdikar House is yours then, Mr. Becquerel?”

“Oh please, Mike, call me Justin.” Becquerel wafted away the formality with a casual wave. “And yes, this charming abode now belongs to me.” Mike tried to come up with a polite way of asking his next question, but the host made it easy for him. “You’re wondering why someone as rich and famous as I am would buy this old dump, aren’t you?” he put it bluntly, and then smiled to ameliorate Mike’s discomfiture. “Not as a fixer-upper, I can assure you. No, I have my reasons, which I will reveal in due course.” He smiled enigmatically, saying nothing more.

“So how did the two of you meet?” Sarah pointedly asked Abby.

Abby flicked her hair with affected nonchalance. “Oh, you know, one simply has to attend the right parties, darling. Justin and I just clicked when we met – we were like kindred spirits. Little did I realize that he already knew so much about me.” She took hold of Sarah’s hand, her socialite facade slipping to reveal her earnestness. “Freddy had been talking to him from the other side – Justin offered to do a sitting, helped me to make contact, too.”

Sarah flashed a look at Becquerel. “Your brother’s been gone for five years, Abby,” she gently pointed out to her friend.

“The dead are never truly gone, Sarah,” Abby denied fervently, “they’re always with us.” She smiled beatifically, her adoring gaze on Becquerel. “It’s

just that we need people like Justin to help us hear them, and thanks to him I now know that Freddy's okay."

Sarah offered a somewhat strained smile in return, squeezing her friend's hand. "That's good, Abby, that's really good."

"I sense you are a skeptic, Miss Smith," observed Becquerel, his lips quirking wryly.

"Your psychic powers tell you that?" Sarah snapped caustically. She tried squeezing Abby's hand again, but this time she pulled away. "Listen, Abby, his act, it's nothing more than a party trick, telling people what they want to hear – cold reading, the true skeptics call it. Or research – it would be easy to check on someone's background beforehand. You're his friend – he wouldn't even have to check."

Becquerel clicked his fingers in the air, and the butler came over with the bottle of champagne, refilling his glass. "Thank you, Kemp," he said with an airy wave of his free hand. "Go and get the séance room ready, there's a dear, it's nearly time." As the surly butler lumbered away, Becquerel took a sip from his glass, regarding Sarah over its rim. "Would you like a demonstration, Miss Smith?" he asked casually, and looked at Mike. "Take your friend here, for example. I had no idea he was coming tonight, so I could hardly have done my research. And yet I find him very intriguing."

"Really?" Mike gulped, his champagne nearly going down the wrong way. "How so? We've only just met."

Becquerel lightly tapped his temple with a fingertip. "I'm psychic, dear, don't you remember?"

"Yes, of course," Mike conceded, though none too sincerely.

"Everyone has their attendant spirits, Mike," Becquerel revealed, "be they guides or guardian angels, or burdens of guilt." He glanced briefly at Abby. "I have my spiritual guide, Entuku, whose wisdom and grace has guided me along a path that has ultimately led here, to do what I was always destined to do. But you, Mike… there are no guides or guardian angels around you, no friends or family members who have passed on but remain bound to this mortal plane to protect you. It's as if your soul were wiped clean recently, past connections erased."

Mike seemed to freeze. "What do you mean?" he asked warily.

The psychic wafted a hand around to indicate Mike's general outline. "Your aura is very… blue – a blue light, a cleansing light, it shone upon aspects of yourself you had hidden away in the shadowy recesses of your unconscious mind, and like flowers waiting for sunshine, they bloomed. You sought another way, thought you could find meaning, a cause, something to belong to. You tried to find peace in the primordial, hoping to return the world to a simpler, less complicated state, a world you could understand. You wished to restore the unity, the crystal purity of the perfect jewel that existed before time, when everyone and everything were all one."

The blood drained from Mike's face, and he shared a look with Sarah; even she appeared momentarily unsettled.

The psychic smiled knowingly and tapped his temple again, peering at Mike over the rims of his sunglasses with piercing, pale blue eyes. He then handed his glass over to Abby and stepped forward, clasping Mike's upper arms and gazing up at him, those penetrating eyes once more shielded by tinted lenses. "That purity, that unity, that peace – they all exist, Mike, and are accessible to those that seek them out. Entuku led me to them, led me to this place, my access point. You may have no guide, no guardian angel, but you will find your way, Mike, in time." He released Mike and then sharply clapped his hands together several times; the conversations petered out around him and he had everyone's attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is nearly time," he announced. "If you would all care to make your way to the specially prepared séance room, I will join you shortly." And with that, he glided out of the room, the guests parting before him.

The expectant silence that his pronouncement had solicited gave way to a rumble of anticipatory murmuring, followed by the clinking of glasses as they were set down on the nearest surface.

Abby seemed to find it difficult to meet Sarah's gaze. "I have to go," she said coolly. "Justin needs me to help him prepare." As she moved away, she paused to reluctantly look back. "I'll be sitting on Justin's right during the séance," she said. "I've reserved the seat on my right for you. I'll tell Kemp to save the seat next to you for Mike." Before Sarah could say anything, she was gone.

The room emptied around Sarah, feeling wretched at what she'd had to do to her old friend. She walked over to join Mike, the only other person left in the room, and held up her hand to stop him before he could speak.

"I know, I know," she sighed. "I was out of order, but I just hate seeing the hold he has on her. He manipulates people, exploiting their vulnerabilities for the sake of entertainment. He's a fake, Mike."

"Then how come he knew about Operation Golden Age?" he asked. "There was a D-Notice in effect to prevent the public from finding out the real reason why London had been evacuated."

Sarah shrugged. "They can put as many D-notices in effect as they like, but events on that scale can't be completely contained – there were just too many people involved. Things were seen, and the rumour mill continues to grind away to this day. Who knows what he's heard?"

Mike was still unsettled. "It's just… This isn't my first run-in with the occult, Sarah. I was there when something was unleashed, something powerful. The feeling of… evil, it was palpable." He looked around: the room suddenly felt larger, the gauzy drapes wafting gently, the flickering candlelight shifting the shadows around. The incense smoke curled and coiled through the air like insubstantial serpents. "All that evil needs is someone to channel it."

A determined look fixed itself on Sarah's face. "Well, there'll be a good story in it either way. Becquerel will either go all Christopher Lee on us or, more likely, tonight's stunt will fall flat on its face, and my article in the next issue of *Metropolitan* will expose him for the manipulative fraudster he is." Her expression became positively pugnacious. "Abby is his last victim."

In what was once the dining room, Kemp opened the double doors and swung them inwards, standing aside to admit the guests. They wandered in, gazing around appreciatively: the warm light from the candelabras reflected from the hastily polished dark, wood-panelled walls, and thick velvet drapes covered the windows. In the middle of the room was a large, round table covered with a green velvet cloth; a candelabra stood in its centre.

As the other guests circled the table, Sarah and Mike entered. Although the table was round, a higher-backed wicker chair sat at its nominated head, obviously Becquerel's place. Sarah moved over to the table, finding a card with her name on it; it had been set on the tabletop in front of a more standard dining chair two places down from Becquerel's wicker throne. Mike pulled the chair back for her, which she acknowledged gracefully, and then he sat down on her right.

Having found their allocated seats, the other guests joined them around the table, settling in. The butler withdrew from the room, closing the double doors behind him.

Mike looked around at the guests: they were nervous yet excited, the party chatter of before reduced to an expectant murmur. They all felt something in the air as Mike did, although perhaps not with the same degree of trepidation. But none of them had been at Devil's End.

"What's keeping him?" Sarah grumbled, glancing over her shoulder at the double doors. She caught Mike's eye as she did so and smirked. "Perhaps he's lost his luminous tambourine," she insinuated, but Mike didn't smile.

Just then, one of the double doors opened and both Becquerel and Abby glided into the room, holding each other's hand like dancers stepping out onto the floor. Abby guided the medium over; he appeared to be in a trance, his face impassive and his eyes as unreadable as always behind their tinted lenses. But then he emerged from his fugue, slowly sweeping his gaze around the table. "My apologies for keeping you all waiting," he said in a voice that was soft and distant. "I had to induce a meditative state to prepare myself. But I am ready now."

Outside in the hallway, Kemp closed the door to the séance room and quietly turned the key in the lock. He then positioned himself opposite the doors, standing impassively with his arms folded, just in case the locked doors weren't enough of a barrier.

He looked along the hallway when he heard a faint whisper; this ill-lit place was full of shadows, but somehow there seemed to be more of them…

Becquerel sat down, pressing his hands palms down upon the green velvet, fingers splayed apart; Abby took her place at his immediate right, only glancing

briefly at Sarah. An expectant hush fell over the table as they all waited for the medium to speak.

"I promised I would reveal my reason for taking on the burden of Chowdikar House," he began, still talking in that dreamy tone. "It is from a sense of obligation: I was given this gift to help others, and there is nowhere else where my help is more needed.

"I first came here a year back, when a TV production company making a documentary requested my help in contacting the spirits that have reputedly troubled this house for years – a publicity stunt, nothing more, I admit that. But when I opened myself up to the history of this house, I realized that it was my destiny to come here, that my whole life has been leading up to this point – this is what I am meant to do. All of the spirits trapped here, all of those poor, tortured souls inextricably bound here – it is my task to free them, to guide them to the light. This house, this lodestone of death and despair – it is the lock, and I am the key.

"But I cannot undertake such a task alone. That is why I have invited you all here tonight. The spirits need my help, but I need yours. Those around this table will act as a lens for my power, focusing it so that I may find my way up through the astral planes and shepherd this poor, directionless flock of souls towards the divine light, where they will become one with the transcendental Other and find peace hereafter."

Sarah stole a sidelong glance at Abby, whose eyes were shining with emotion and faith. Glaring at Becquerel, Sarah had to bite her tongue.

"So if you will join me on this quest, my friends," Becquerel concluded, "please symbolize it by joining hands with me, and each other." He turned his delicate hands over, holding them out to be accepted; Abby immediately reached out to clasp his right hand, and also took hold of Sarah's hand. Sarah turned to Mike, shrugging before offering her hand. Mike took it, and felt the person next to him take his other hand. And so it continued around the table until the circuit was complete.

Justin bowed his head, his eyes closed behind his sunglasses. He regulated his breathing, channelling his *chi*; when he had accrued enough energy he recited in a low voice, "Entuku, my spirit guide, hear me now. Use the power of the circle to manifest and join us. We seek an audience with you, so that we may share in your knowledge and wisdom, and use it to help others."

There was nothing but silence for a few long moments, the collective gaze of the guests sliding away in embarrassment. Sarah suppressed a smirk. But then the flames of the central candelabra flickered and guttered, shocked gasps and mutterings coming from the others. She craned her neck as she checked that the double doors were still shut and that none of the curtains were shifting with the breeze through an open window—

There was a cry nearby, and Sarah realized that it had come from Abby: her friend was wincing in pain, Becquerel now squeezing her hand in a vice-like grip. "Hey, let go of her!" she ordered the medium.

A plump, older woman across the table shushed her. "You'll break his concentration!" she hissed.

“Oh, shush yourself,” Sarah retorted and leaned forward, glaring at the medium. “Let go of Abby’s hand, Becquerel, you’re hurting her!”

Becquerel slowly raised his head, his face contorted with a ghastly smile that was more of a grimace. “Entuku,” he drawled out.

“That’s not Entuku,” whispered Abby, fearfully drawing back but Becquerel’s grip held her fast.

“I can’t let go of his hand!” the man on Becquerel’s left cried out, and then tried shaking his other hand free, to no avail. “We can’t break the circle!”

Mike and Sarah discovered that they too were inextricably linked. “It’s like we’ve been super-glued together,” Sarah said through gritted teeth as both she and Mike attempted to pull their hands apart.

The flames of the other candelabras flickered and died, leaving only the central one to hold back the encroaching darkness.

Hysteria gripped the guests as tightly as they did each other. “Quiet, all of you!” Mike barked authoritatively, his breath pluming into clouds as the temperature dropped. “We have to stay calm,” he then reassured them, after Captain Yates’ best parade ground voice had snapped them to attention. He leaned around Sarah, pushing himself into Becquerel’s eye line. “Mr. Becquerel,” he called out towards the shadowy figure hunched over the table, “whatever you’re doing you’ve got to stop. Snap out of it, man!”

A middle-aged male guest a few seats along gave a nervous laugh. “It’s a trick!” he exclaimed shakily, holding up his hand and the hand of the person next to him, as if declaring a winner. “He’s hypnotized us! That’s how hypnotists choose the more suggestible members from their audience: he asks them to clasp their hands together, and if they can’t separate them, that means they’re already under!”

“Yes, that’s right!” Sarah crowed. “This is nothing more than a form of mass hysteria, generated by him!” She looked vehemently in Becquerel’s direction, and gasped in shock.

Becquerel’s eyes had snapped open, and although the effect was damped down by his tinted lenses, she could see that his pupils were now dots of bluish-white light – flash photo eyes, the eyes of a nocturnal animal shining from the darkness.

Abby cringed from him, her hand still being crushed. “Justin, please,” she begged, “you have to regain control, this isn’t you!”

He jerked as if winded, his head dipping; when he looked up at her, his brow was furrowed and glistening with sweat, but the light within him had dimmed. “But it is me,” he rasped. “I wanted to ascend along with them. They promised they’d take me if I helped them, provided them with the power they needed. But they lied to me, Abby, Entuku was lying – he was one of them all along.” He flinched again, his face racked with pain, the celestial fire within him reigniting. “I can’t stop it, Abby.” He grimaced, the light seeping through the gaps in his teeth. “You have to get away. They’re coming – they’re coming for all of… you—”

His mouth yawned wide, becoming a glowing oval of light as he tried to scream, but couldn’t. The opening grew larger, his features blurring as they were

consumed by the swirling maw of a burgeoning vortex. The remaining candlelight was snuffed out by the sudden inrush of howling wind – which also tore at hair and clothing – but the light issuing from within Becquerel was flaring brightly if erratically, stroboscopic flashes that seared the retinas and rendered everything as if viewed through a juddering zoetrope.

The darkness was burned away, but shadows still remained, hovering behind the guests seated across the table from Mike. The flaring energy from the runaway vortex reduced everything to snapshots, but he could piece together what was happening, and it horrified him.

The amorphous, tenebrous shapes engulfed the guests across from him, their terrified screams diminishing to a warble as their own forms began to grow fuzzy around the edges. As they faded away, the shadows coalesced into something with more definition, supplanting them completely – they looked like flickering black flames, with sparkles of energy coruscating at their dark hearts.

Mike's innards dropped in terror when something brushed past his back. But it was the man sitting on his immediate right, the person clutching his hand, who was the target; Mike watched out of the corner of his eye as the man thrashed and writhed, his grip grinding the carpal bones of Mike's hand.

But then the unfortunate man's hand lost cohesion and his grip broke like a snapped elastic band. Mike was free. Wasting no time, Mike kicked back his chair and jumped to his feet, hauling Sarah up as well. To his dismay, he discovered that he was not free after all: the circuit had been broken, but they were still connected to Becquerel.

Regardless, he instinctively ran for the doors, desperately pulling himself and Sarah as far away from the table as possible. Mike looked despairingly back along the small human chain he had created, both Sarah's and Abby's hair whipping around their faces. Just over Abby's shoulder, a whirlpool swirled in mid-air, having consumed Becquerel's shoulders and upper torso as well now, although unfortunately the hand gripping Abby's was still there. It was only a matter of moments before she crossed the event horizon of the phenomenon.

One by one, the flickering shadow-shapes rose and trailed like streamers through the air, shooting directly into the mouth of the tunnel that snaked away into some unfathomable distance. There was a sound that Mike heard over the wind as the last shape streaked into the vortex – a triumphant, primal howl.

They were gone, but the whirlpool would not, could not, dissipate; Abby's feet were starting to leave the ground. There was no more time.

In one of the snapshots, Mike saw the table cover being twisted around the trailing edge of the vortex, the heavier candelabra skittering over the table top. Not stopping to think, he double-backed and lunged towards the table, grabbing the candelabra. The vortex threatened to pull him in, but he jammed his thighs against the edge of the table, bracing himself as he raised the candelabra high and then smashed it down on what was still visible of Becquerel's wrist—

The next thing Mike knew, he was being pulled away by Sarah and Abby, fighting their way over to the doors, the wind lashing at them. Mike realized he was still holding the candelabra and threw it at Becquerel, but it was simply swallowed up by the maelstrom.

Sarah and Abby clutched onto the door handles for dear life; they wouldn't turn, and the women rattled them furiously, pulling them and smacking their palms and fists against the doors. "They're locked!" Sarah cried despairingly.

"Kemp? Kemp! Open these doors immediately!" Abby yelled, her voice cracking with hysteria, as she pummelled the door with his fist. "Kemp!"

"Stand back," Mike ordered; the doors opened inwards, so no point in dislocating his shoulder, but he reasoned a well-aimed kick at the lock might make it give way. Proximity to the vortex prevented a run-up, but he threw his full weight into it, the doors juddering as the impact was transmitted up his leg with teeth-rattling force. But they remained locked. He snatched a look over his shoulder.

The room was being stripped of everything: curtains, the table and chairs – everything was disappearing into the spinning gyre. They didn't have long before the whole room was consumed; in fact, the room's geometry was bending around it, the effect of gravitational lensing.

Just as Mike was about to kick the doors again, something heavy crashed through them; that something was Kemp, or rather his fuzzy outline, superimposed with one of the shadow wraiths. Kemp momentarily loomed over Mike, but his form lost the battle and the shadow that won streaked right into the waiting tunnel mouth.

Mike grabbed the women and shoved them out into the hallway, slamming the doors shut behind him. He took Sarah's and Abby's hands and was about to lead them down the hallway to the main door and out of this madhouse, when he drew up short: there were shadows at the end of the hallway, and they were moving.

Mike spun on his heel, but the other end of the hallway was succumbing to the spatial distortion, twisting and telescoping away endlessly.

Left with no options, they pressed their backs against the wall opposite the doors to the séance room; the frame of the doorway was also warping and distorting, like a reflection in a funhouse mirror. Even out here, Mike could still feel the inexorable draw of that vortex whirling like a dervish in mid-air.

The shadow forms slithered ever closer from the other sepulchral end of the hallway, using natural shadows as their medium.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what else to do," Mike said desolately. He gazed down at Sarah Jane, her boyish haircut all awry, strands plastered across her frightened face. The Doctor would never forgive him for this—

He was suddenly jerked towards Abby, and he whipped his head around, fearing that the end had come. Whatever he was ready for, it was not for the sight of a translucent, ghostly yet human-looking arm and hand extruded from the warping wall just along from Abby, beckoning to her. And she was reaching out for it. "Abby, no!" he cried out.

She merely looked over her shoulder at him, favouring him with a beatific smile. "It's all right, Mike," she assured him, squeezing his hand tightly so that he couldn't pull it free. "Everything's going to be all right now." And with that, she allowed the ghostly hand to gently clasp hers, and it retracted into the

insubstantial wall, drawing Abby in along with it until she too disappeared, only her hand in his remaining as he held back.

The doors to the séance room crashed open and flew off their hinges, spinning away into the maelstrom. Gritting his teeth and screwing his eyes shut against the howling tumult, Mike stepped forward into the unknown, dragging Sarah along with him—

And suddenly the three of them found themselves outside. They swayed for a moment with disorientation and dislocation, but Sarah was the first to come to her senses, pulling out her keys and making a dash for her car. "Come on!" she cried. "We don't know when that thing's going to stop!"

They all jumped in, Abby bundled into the back seat by Mike. Sarah fumbled the key into the ignition and the engine roared into life. She released the handbrake and hit the accelerator, the rear tires spitting up gravel as they gained traction. The little car launched forward, hurtling along the driveway. Sarah's wide, mascara-accentuated eyes kept looking in the rear-view mirror as Chowdikar House retreated into the distance.

The car shot out through the gates and Sarah pulled a hard left, the tires screeching as the car slewed along the road outside. They all jerked forward as Sarah braked and threw open her door; she ran over to the wall crowned with rusting wrought-iron railings that bordered the grounds of the house. Mike got out as well, helping Abby climb out. They went over to join Sarah, mirroring her fearful yet awed expression as they looked back at Chowdikar House.

It was collapsing in upon itself, the shrinking exterior suffused by the bluish-white glow of the vortex. The other guests' cars were lifted off the driveway and sucked in as well. The agglomerated spherical mass of stone, timber, glass and metal hung suspended over the dark grounds like a new full moon, and with a final blinding flash of energy, it was crushed down into the vortex, which mercifully winked out of existence afterwards.

Abby's hands slid down the railings, and she collapsed into a sobbing heap with her back against the wall. Sarah hunkered down alongside her, embracing her. "It's all right, Abby," she soothed, "we made it, we're safe."

"Yes, we are," Abby confirmed in a tremulous voice, tears streaking her smiling face. "It was Freddy who led us out of the house, Sarah – my guardian angel. Do you believe now?"

Sarah hugged her closer, allowed Abby to release all her pent-up emotion whilst she looked up at Mike for answers. But he had none for her; even he wasn't sure what he had witnessed during those final, desperate moments.

A week later, Mike and Sarah peered through the padlocked gates leading to the grounds of Chowdikar House, Sarah's car parked nearby. "NO ENTRY" warning signs had been hung on the gates and perimeter walls, barbed wire now crowning the wrought-iron railings. Even from here, the daylight allowed them to see the full extent of the destruction: where the house had once stood, there

was now a deep crater, like the bombsites that had scarred this city during the Blitz. Chowdikar House had been removed, right down to its very foundations.

"That was where they found it," Sarah indicated, "at the bottom of the crater – UNIT spotted it during their initial sweep, after they'd cordoned the place off. They don't know what it is, other than it being some kind of alien artefact or device. The Brig's still waiting for the Doctor to come back from his travels, so he can give them some answers."

Mike nodded, still gazing over at that great gap, not only in the ground but in their understanding as well. "Thanks for keeping me out of all this," he offered.

Sarah shrugged. "It wasn't that difficult – officially, you were never really there. And Abby wasn't saying anything."

"How is she, anyway?"

"I haven't spoken to her since the debriefing," Sarah replied, frustrated. "The tabloid press have been hounding her about what happened, not happy with the cover story that was released. So she's gone into hiding – even I don't know where she is."

Mike turned to face Sarah, leaning on the gate. "I suppose she needs time to think about what happened – her brother Freddy, I mean."

Sarah pivoted away to look into the grounds again, folding her arms. "Come on, Mike," she scoffed softly. "We know the cause wasn't supernatural now – it was something alien, something with a scientific basis." She tilted her chin up as she regarded the crater, a confident gleam in her eye. "The Doctor will work it all out, when he gets back."

"Maybe," Mike said vaguely. "But perhaps he should leave the dead in peace. I think we owe them that much, don't you?"

Sarah looked back at Mike, a sarcastic comment on the tip of her tongue, but studying him from beneath the brim of her cloche hat, she realized he was being totally earnest. She also realized then that Abby wasn't the only one to have been profoundly affected by what they'd witnessed at Chowdikar House that night; something had definitely changed in her friend Mike Yates. He was no longer a man in limbo, neither one thing nor another. Now, looking into his eyes, she saw that he'd been awoken to new possibilities. He'd found belief again.

"Come on." Sarah grinned up at him, nodding over at her car. "I'll give you a lift – where do you want to go?"

Iron Joe

by Abel Diaz

Everywhere Peri looked, there was dust. Sand and bushes and rocks, dotted all over the arid landscape with about as much sense or regard for aesthetics as… well, the Doctor. Well, *this* Doctor, who was lounging back in the seat opposite her, his patchwork coat an ocular punch to the face amidst the sea of browns and greys that populated the rest of the carriage.

She'd read of the Transcontinental Railroad back in school, be it from the brick of a textbook whose age and colouring gave the impression of it too having been around since the Railroad, or from the almost illegible scrawling on the chalkboard that Mother would've called "good handwriting." Still, she knew the Cliff's Notes: two big companies, the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific, in the midst of the Civil War, had unified the entire country by rail. East met West in Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869, united by a final golden spike. And now, here she was on the first train.

The carriage, first class thanks to the Doctor having produced some loose gems that he claimed were a gift from some Rajah or Pasha, was in keeping with her textbook recount. The seating was a soft green leather, framed by rather beautiful varnished oak. The walls bore the same colour scheme, with little gas lamps in the shape of budding lilies dotted between each seating arrangement. The floor was covered in green plush carpeting with blue diamonds.

"The plain of Utah," came the familiar pompous tone. "Until a few months ago, positively inhospitable. Still, your species' desire to become masters of any feat lead them to build all this. Remarkable. Absolutely remarkable, Peri."

"It's so strange, Doctor," she replied. "It's one thing to see it in a textbook back in fifth grade, but this… this is something else." She had opted for a rather conservative blue dress with a silver brooch. "In the movies, you would always see cowboys and Indians duking it out on a train like this—"

"Oh greatly sensationalized tosh, Peri," the Doctor huffed, waving a dismissive hand. "The by-product of Hollywood's endless obsession with romanticism. Honestly, you'd be more likely to run into Robin Hood then—"

Then, their window shattered, followed in rapid, almost melodic succession by the others in the carriage. Everyone ducked, collectively screaming.

"Doctor!" Peri cried, tugging at the sprawled Doctor, only for the mop of blonde curls to shoot straight up.

"I'm fine," he responded curtly, "but that shot was most definitely not. Not for this time period anyway."

Before Peri could interject, there came another frenzied yell from an elderly passenger: "Sweet Jesus! It's Iron Joe!" Then came another shot, now more visible as bright energy as opposed to a bullet, and another collective yelp from the passengers. "Them shots, it's a gun crafted by Lucifer hisself!" cried another frightened man, pulling down hard on the rim of his bowler.

Slowly, the Doctor got himself upright, peeking out past the rim of the window.

“Doctor?” Peri asked, following his action. “What is—”

At a distance of some two or three carriages down was a gang of galloping men on horseback. They looked like they came right out of an Eastwood movie, with large, wide-brimmed hats, unshaven faces, and whooping and hollering like banshees, waving revolvers in the air. But it was not them she was focused on, but the one right in the middle of their band: he was a towering figure, almost as tall as any one of his compatriots and their horse combined, and just as fast on foot. His large hat and poncho hardly seemed a burden.

He lifted up a hand, glistening in the sun. Another energy shot blasted through the Doctor’s open window and out the rear door of the carriage, leaving a considerable hole behind.

“Doctor, what is that thing?!”

“Tricky to say, but one thing’s for sure, Peri: it doesn’t belong here.”

They both ducked as another shot went over their heads and blew out what was left of the opposite window.

The mystery gunman surged forward, powerful feet pounding through the desert sand, moving well past the horses and towards the Doctor’s carriage. A rifle barrel poked through a window on the end of the carriage and fired. The bullet hit the poncho, only to ricochet. Another bullet, the same result. Then a third shot the hat off and revealed a metal head with large, angular bars leading from the crest down to the side of its head. The face was blank, no more than a small slat and two circles with small tear drops at the edges.

“A Cyberman…” muttered the Doctor, peering back over.

The Cyberman leapt up and crashed through the side of carriage. The passengers screamed and cowered before the silver giant. The portly old conductor got up, trembling and shaking before the sight of the Cyberman, and discharged a shot from his rifle. No sooner had the bullet suffered the same fate as its three compatriots did the Cyberman tilt its head down to the cowering conductor. Reaching forth a metal hand, it snatched the rifle without resistance. Gripping the barrel with the other hand, it bent the gun in two as if it were taffy. The conductor shrieked.

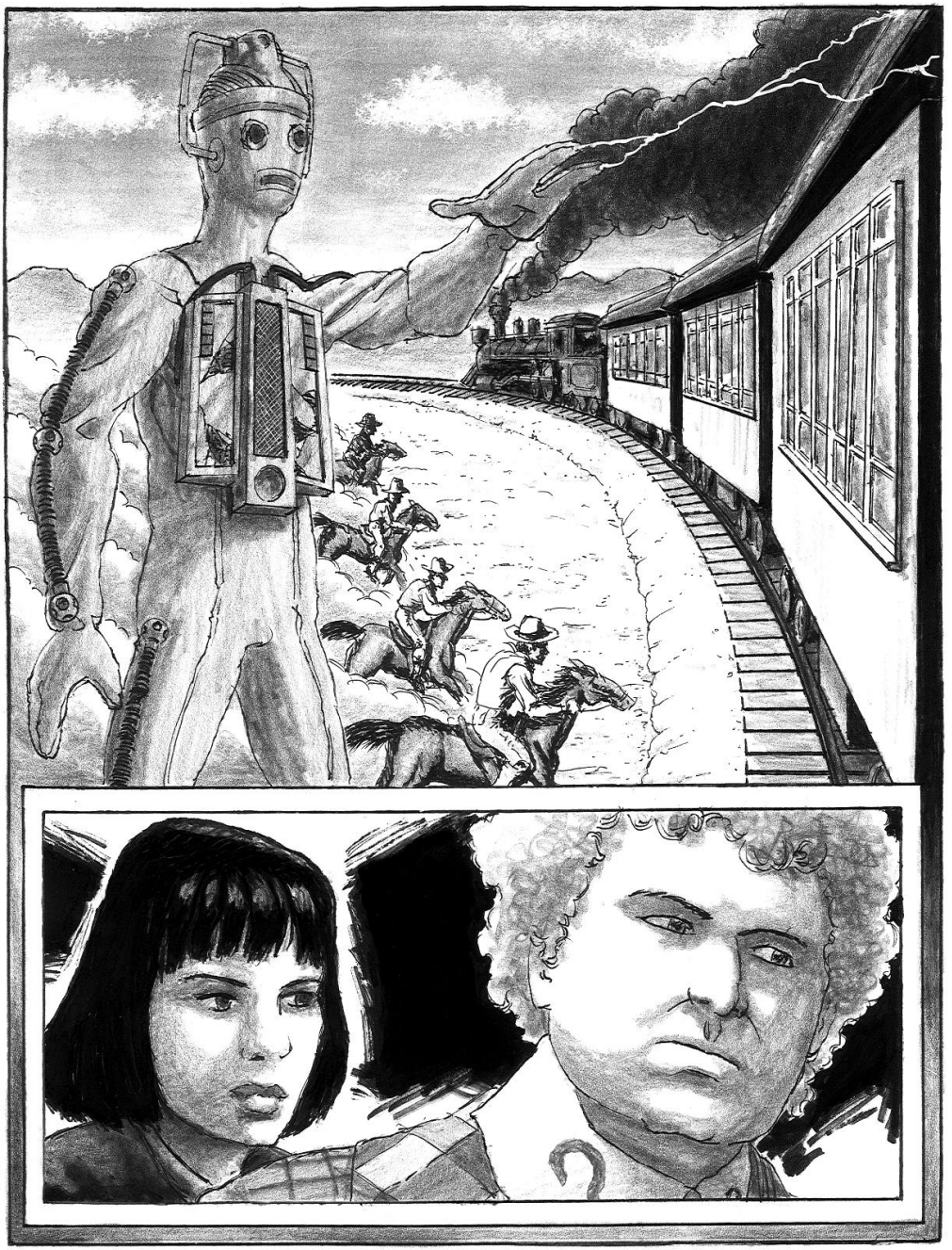

Illustration by Michael Leis

Peri looked to the Doctor, gazing intently towards the Cyberman. Then, a rather hoarse voice called out, “All right, everybody! Just keep yo’selves nice an’ quiet, and we can get this done real smooth-like!”

Into the compartment stepped a lanky, unshaven man, no older than maybe twenty-five. His grey shirt was stained with a trailing of sweat, and his wide brim hat was pulled down low. He waved a revolver in the air. Behind him came a rather tubby Hispanic fellow with long, greasy hair, and then a big muscular brute with a dark tan.

“We is the Wesley gang, named after mahself, and if ya’ll cooperate, we don’t gots ta shoot nobody. So come on then, start emptying ya valuables,” said the lanky bandit with a rotten-toothed grin. The passengers began digging into pockets and purses, unfastening watches, and removing rings and necklaces.

“That’s right. Jus’ like church.” He grinned, holding out his hat like a collection plate, taking up the offered goods. Iron Joe marched by his side, towering over him, each step loud and heavy. Spotting the Doctor, Wesley arched an eyebrow and stopped. “An’ what in the hell are you supposed to be? You one them big city actors?”

“Oh just a traveller, my good fellow.” The Doctor smiled, twiddling his fingers. He glanced over to Iron Joe. “Must say, unusual friend you have there.”

“He’s one of a kind, teapot,” Wesley announced. He pounded against Iron Joe’s chest, hard and metallic. “Ain’t not a damn thing can hurt ‘im.”

“I imagine not,” the Doctor replied, standing before Iron Joe. The extensive rust, scratches and dents covering his armour caught Peri’s eye. He continued: “You’re a very long way from home, aren’t you?”

“Eh, why ya botherin’? Dumb brute is mute,” Wesley snapped, “but he is real good at other stuff.” He pointed to the Doctor. “Show ‘em.”

Before the Doctor could retort, a metal hand clamped onto his left shoulder. Slowly, it applied a crushing pressure. The Doctor grimaced, clutching onto Iron Joe’s arm.

“Doctor!” Peri screamed, running forward only to be grabbed by Wesley. She struggled against him, but this only made him chuckle. “Stop him!” she wailed as the Doctor, face contorting, kneeled under the pressure of Iron Joe’s powerful grip. Tears welled in Peri’s eyes.

Wesley smirked. “Okay Joe, enough.”

Iron Joe loosened his grip, as did Wesley. Peri darted to the Doctor’s side.

“Oooh, even with his share of wear and tear, that one still packs a grip,” the Doctor muttered, massaging his shoulder. Peri helped him to stand.

The fat bandit approached, a sack over his shoulder clinking and tingling with the sound of loot. “It’s all clear, boss. It’s *por ahi*.” He pointed his revolver to the back of the compartment.

Wesley gave another filthy smile. “Now the real work begins…” He turned to Iron Joe. “All right then, Joe, time for pay dirt,” he said, cocking his revolver and walking towards the back of the compartment. Iron Joe followed suit. “Shoot anyone so much as sneezes, Bob,” he whispered to the muscular bandit. The fat one followed not long after, sadly leaving the fondling of a young woman’s raven locks.

Peri turned to the Doctor. “What do we do now?”

“How do a bunch of flea-brained bandits in mid-nineteenth century America control a Cyberman is the pressing question here, Peri,” he responded, eyeing Bob at the door. “But first…”

Peri followed the Doctor as he walked right up to Bob, who scowled and tightened his grip on his pistol in response.

“I say, my good man,” the Doctor said, beaming and bringing up a pair of disarming hands, “I don’t suppose you could spare me just a moment of your time?” He began rummaging through his pockets. “Hold that, would you?” he said to Peri, producing a small white bag. The Doctor next passed over a magnifying glass, a Rubik’s Cube, briefly remarking “Hmm, still need to patent that,” and a rubber duck. Bob snarled even louder. “Eureka!” the Doctor exclaimed, revealing a small, yellow yo-yo.

“Wha—” Bob began, but was soon transfixed by the spinning yo-yo, watching it go up and down, followed by a breakaway and then a forward pass for good measure.

“Hmm, like it?” the Doctor asked. Bob nodded. “That’s it, right this way,” he whispered, slowly moving forward, bringing the brute with him. “Yes, very interesting, isn’t it?” Bob was fixated. “Well, catch!” the Doctor exclaimed, throwing back the yo-yo. Bob bounded after it, fiddling with it in his huge paws.

Peri stared, a little befuddled. “What was that, Doctor?”

“Large exterior, small mind, Peri,” the Doctor said, smiling, hands in pocket. “But enough of that,” he proclaimed, making for the door. “We’ve got a Cyberman to catch!”

Peri picked up her skirts and followed. Petticoats looked good on the likes of Vivien Leigh, she thought, but were hardly practical when chasing alien creeps. Passing through a few carriages, she caught up with the Doctor, his ear pressed to the door of the last compartment. With a gesture of his fingers, he beckoned her to join him. Inside she heard Wesley yelling impatiently “Damn it! I know it’s in here somewheres!”

“But *jefe*,” responded a Hispanic voice, “we turn over everything, and still no sign of *el tesoro*.”

“Old Man Hickory’s Chest is on this damn train, and we ain’t leavin’ till we got it!” Underscoring Wesley’s words was the sound of slow, heavy footsteps.

“What do we do—” Peri began only to be shushed by the Doctor. He pointed to the keyhole. She knelt down and peered through; inside the dim space, the two bandits were toppling boxes and suitcases, throwing clothing and other valuables onto the floor. Iron Joe loomed over them. What’s more, they had their backs turned to the door. She whispered this back to the Doctor, who slowly pulled on the door handle, allowing just enough space for them to squeeze through. They ducked behind some large barrels just inside the compartment.

“Where is it?!” Wesley shrieked. He furiously kicked aside a lady’s suitcase, tipping out an assortment of frilly white and pink dresses. “If I don’t find that damn chest, I swear I’ll—”

He stopped. Buried under the mess of dresses was something metallic. Wesley parted the clothing to reveal a battered metal chest, engraved with the initials "J.H." Iron Joe stomped over and effortlessly ripped off the padlock. With an almost religious reverence, Wesley carefully opened up the box, his eyes seemingly about to burst.

Diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and rubies glittered under the thin slivers of sunlight. Trembling, Wesley scooped up a handful of the precious stones in his hand and held them. "My… God." He then let them cascade back into the box with an eager giggle. "The old timer was right! Hickory, you thieving son of a gun, freeloadin' when Union soldiers weren't lookin'!" He picked out a large uncut ruby, marvelling as he held it to the light. "Too bad yo little sis' ain't never gonna see this." His fat companion mirrored his reaction.

"What's the Cyberman got to do with a box of stolen gems?" Peri whispered. The Doctor put a quieting finger to her lips, concentrating on the Cyberman.

Then, Iron Joe's hand shot into the box. So hard in fact it punched right through it, grabbing onto something. The gems clattered to the ground. "Hey now, what's the big idea?!" whined Wesley. Not responding, Iron Joe brought up a metal cylinder lined with connecting pins. The Doctor squinted to get a better look. "Are you listenin' to me, you hunk a junk?!"

Iron Joe swiftly plugged in the cylinder beneath its respirator unit. A whirring, clicking noise temporarily distracted the two bandits from their anger. "Central systems reactivating. All communicatory functions re-enabled," came a familiar, cold monotone.

Wesley scrunched his face at Joe. "Joe? You-you can talk—"

A vice-like grip clutched Wesley by his throat and launched him through the wall, leaving a gaping hole in the carriage. His screams quickly faded away. Terrified, the fat bandit drew his revolver, tucked unceremoniously in the back of his tatty pants, and aimed it at Iron Joe. The reinvigorated Cybermen slowly marched towards him.

"S-s-stay back!" he squealed. "I-I-I'm warnin' you!" He discharged a shot, but it didn't so much as make a dent in Iron Joe. He then shot off another, and another, and another till his revolver clicked empty. Breathing heavily, sweating profusely, he dropped his gun and collapsed to the ground as the Cyberman loomed over him. "No! No!" he cried, shielding his face with his hands. Iron Joe raised an arm, its hand crackling with energy.

"A cowboy Cyberman," the Doctor exclaimed, stepping out from behind the barrels. "Now that's one prospect I'd never envisioned." The glow of energy faded as the Cyberman turned to face the Doctor. "I was rather doubting the latest upgrades included a wardrobe out of a spaghetti western."

"You know of our kind?" the Cyberman intoned.

"Indeed so. What is your business? Surely the Cyber-coffers aren't so dry as to need to scrabble for trinkets."

"Our scouting mission suffered a technical fault," came the colourless response. "We were forced to make an emergency landing on this planet."

"We?" The Doctor quirked an eyebrow. "There was another?"

“Cybership damaged beyond repair. This unit is the sole survivor. Suffered damage to several functions, including speech capabilities.”

“But what’s that got to do with being the pet dog of bandits?” the Doctor asked, his curiosity aroused.

“Primitive lifeforms raided the ship during this unit’s incapacitation. Their presumed leader was addressed as ‘Old Man Hickory.’ Upon semi-restoration of functions, this unit set out in pursuit, but lack of further information as well as compromise of internal systems delayed action.”

“So it was then you came across that poor lot of bushwhackers and decided to offer your services?”

“They were the first lifeforms to provide further intelligence on Hickory, and they valued this unit’s superior resources.”

“Ah! I see. You agreed to be their muscle, in exchange for tracking down this Hickory fellow, or rather, his chest.”

“That is correct.”

“So, what now then?” the Doctor asked, hands in pockets. “You’ve got no ship, and you’re the only one of your crew still standing.”

“That is a non-issue,” came the cold response, prompting bemusement from the Doctor.

“What do you mean?”

It pointed to the cylinder. “Signal amplifier. This unit is transmitting back to Cyber-Control. The fleet needs orders.”

The Doctor’s eyes shot wide. “A fleet?!”

“A division is presently on standby near Mercury, awaiting report.”

“So you’re invasion scouts then,” the Doctor huffed, clearly not amused. “A few thousand tin men waiting up there to descend on an Earth in no way able to defend itself from you.” The Doctor’s temper was flaring like a forest fire, his hands scrunched into fists. “I will not allow you to hurt these people.”

“What can you do to prevent this?” came the cold reply.

“Doctor!” Peri yelled as she hurled a bundle of dresses at the Cyberman. The Cyberman began to jerk and stomp about, clutching the mound of silk and cloth covering its head.

“Well done, Peri!” said the Doctor. “Now then…” He scanned his surroundings. “What is there, what is there…” A sound of shredding fabric prompted a “Doctor!” from Peri.

“Give me a moment… Ah-ha!”

As the Cyberman tore away the last dress, it saw the Doctor and Peri charging forward with a rather heavy looking suitcase like a ram. They knocked it off balance and through the hole in the carriage left by Wesley. It stretched out a hand and clamped onto the edge of the hole. “Doctor!” Peri cried. Groaning mechanically, the Cyberman reached forth its other hand. “Down!” the Doctor yelled. They dropped to the floor as a bolt of energy whizzed by overhead.

The wood around Iron Joe’s hand began to splinter and crack under the weight and drag. “You will be eliminated,” came the cold threat. “You are enemies of the Cyber race. You will be—”

The wood gave way, and the Cyberman went down, its right foot catching in the wheels. A series of mechanized cries followed as it was dragged under the train.

Peri breathed a sigh of relief and slumped against the wall. She then shot up anxiously. “What about the fleet, Doctor?”

The Doctor chortled, dusting off his coat and giving Peri a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Don’t you worry. With our friend gone, those ships will never get the signal, and they’ll declare the mission a failure.”

She sighed happily and collapsed against the Doctor’s chest. He hugged back.

“Now then, shall we adjourn to the dining car? It’s been a good few centuries since I last enjoyed a proper Porterhouse steak. I wonder if they do a portion of chips with it… Oh wait, it’s *fries* here, isn’t it?”

A Torch in the Darkness III: Medusa

by David N. Smith & Violet Addison

The universe was ending.

The very last sun was dying.

A few plumes of star-stuff provided a meagre light.

Clara was standing in the darkening desert, feeling the last heat of the universe bleed away. Refuge, the last stronghold of life, had been swallowed by the swirling maelstrom of sand thrown up by the departure of the Alpha TARDIS.

The Doctor lay motionless on the ground at her feet, the sand piling up against him.

If he was dead, she was in very serious trouble.

If he was alive, she would still be in very serious trouble, but at least he would be there, with his impossibly inventive mind and his incredible knack for escaping the inescapable. She shook his shoulder, hoping for the best, because hope was all she had.

His eyes burst open, as he exploded up onto his feet, dancing wildly around her, his hands clamped to the side of his head.

He would save them. She knew he would.

He frowned at her, his eyebrows knotting together in absolute confusion.

"Susan?" he asked, pointing a finger at her inquiringly.

It was not quite the life-saving plan she had been hoping for.

"No." She shivered, the skin of her arms puckering with goosebumps as the temperature plummeted. "Shouldn't we run?"

"Well, it's normally a good plan," he replied, glancing around at the deepening darkness and the impenetrable, swirling clouds of sand. "We certainly don't want to stay here."

He grabbed hold of her hand, pulling her forward into the darkness, moving with absolute certainty across the stark, featureless desert.

"How can you be sure it's this way?" she cried, as she struggled to keep up with his spritely, long-legged gait.

"The TARDIS is the last thing in existence. With all the background noise gone, I can feel her. We've been together a long time, me and my ol' gal. I could find her anywhere."

Plunging headlong into the darkness, they hurried through the swirling, biting clouds, until the familiar blue Police Box loomed up ahead of them, the light of its sign shining through the gloom. As they reached the door, Clara could see ice crusting over the lock; but with a click of the Doctor's fingers, the doors sprang open, shattering the ice.

Clara laughed with relief as she stumbled inside onto the walkway, while the Doctor quietly closed the white wooden doors on the darkness outside.

"Vicki?" he asked, turning to face her, his eyes searching her face questioningly.

"You really don't know who I am, do you?" she gasped.

“Steven?” he tried, but glanced down at her plaid dress and platform boots. “No, that somehow seems unlikely.”

“But we’ve been through so much together! How can you forget who I am?”

“Well, you look very dowdy, don’t you?” The Doctor shrugged defensively. “Not very memorable. You dress like someone’s school teacher.”

“I am a school teacher,” she replied, hoping that by giving him information, she would somehow nudge his mind back into gear.

“Ah ha!” A look of delight filled his eyes, as he jabbed the air with his forefinger. “Coal Hill School, right?

“Yes!”

He leapt forward, embracing her tightly.

“Barbara!”

“No!” she retorted, fighting her way out of his embrace.

“Ian?” he tried, his eyes wrinkling skeptically.

She shook her head.

The Doctor put his hands back onto the sides his head, running them through his tangled grey hair, making it stand out in even wilder disarray.

“This isn’t right,” he croaked. “Someone’s been messing with my mind. And I positively frown on that kind of thing.”

Clara folded her arms.

“You frown on everything.”

“I’ve got a lot of eyebrow. It would be a shame to waste them,” the Doctor replied, his fingers moving across his face, as if discovering his features for the first time, before he turned to stare at her again. “Have you never changed your mind about anything?”

“Travelling with you.” Clara shrugged, playfully returning his goggle-eyed stare. “I was going to stop, but I changed my mind. A decision I’m slightly regretting now.”

“It’s difficult to change your mind. To undo a decision. To admit you’re wrong.” The Doctor waved a finger at her. “But imagine if someone did that to you, without your permission – imagine someone changed your mind.”

“Nasty.”

The Doctor nodded, turning his attention to the console.

“It’s more than just my thoughts though – I have new memories.” The Doctor spun to face the console, hurriedly powering up the engines, setting them in flight. “My first self has just witnessed the beginnings of the legendary Perseus. My eighth self has just run into that dangerous amateur, the Meddling Monk. While my sixth self has just encountered a Cyberman in the Old West! And the less said about that business with the unstable flan, the better! They are all events that never happened in my original timeline. Whoever stole the Alpha is tampering with time! They’re using it to manipulate the Vortex itself, to change the destination of my TARDIS. They’re changing my past! They’re giving me new experiences, which in turn are changing me!”

“Is that serious?” Clara glanced uncomfortably at her shoes. “I mean, it’s not as if we’ve never done that before.”

The Doctor scowled, staring into the mid-distance, his eyes flickering from side-to-side, as they sifted through his newly formed memories.

"Most of it's harmless. My past selves are managing each problem that's thrown at them." The Doctor rubbed his fingers against his temples. "But one of them has made a mistake. We can't let that happen!"

The Doctor lurched forward, his hands flying madly across the controls, as he frantically changed their course. The engines wheezed and groaned as the vessel shuddered back into existence.

The Doctor stared ominously at the white wooden doors.

"I've rarely done this sort of thing before," he said, a hint of worry in his voice.

"Done what?"

"Deliberately crossed my own timestream. It's a violation of the First Law of Time. Although this is different, as it's happening now, being done to me, but I'm still not really supposed to do things like this." He shrugged apologetically to the universe at large.

"Says who?"

"Well, nobody anymore." The Doctor stepped back along the walkway, his shoulders sagging sadly as he unlatched the main doors. "The Time Lords who made those rules are long since gone."

"So what does it matter then?"

The Doctor suddenly stopped, snapped his fingers and grinned at her.

"Small, brunette, a bit hopeless and an accent from the North West of England," he cried excitedly. "You must be Dodo!"

Clara tilted her head and stared at him incredulously.

"Who the hell is Dodo?"

"Oh. I was so sure that time." The Doctor scratched his head, ruffling his hair still further. "I must be forgetting someone. You're not pretty enough to be Polly."

"Clara!" she yelled at him, her patience finally exhausted. "I'm Clara!"

"Don't think I ever knew a Clara," he mused, frowning. "But all the memories are such a jumble now. Given that my past is being rewritten, it's not surprising. It's difficult to know what was, from what it is. It'll take a while for the neural connections to heal, to remake all the necessary connections."

Clara shook her head in exasperation, turned her back on him and marched outside. He was in no state to be embarking on adventures, yet they seemed to have no choice. If his wits were scattered, she would just have to do her best to keep hers together.

She had stepped out onto a small path which clung to a shoreline, overlooking a wild ocean which raged and tore at the rocky cliffs below. The wind howled around her, whipping her hair up and lashing her with a smattering of rain.

The Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS and opened an umbrella.

"You know, in the old days, we took forever checking the instruments to make sure it was safe to go outside. It took me a couple of hundred years to figure out the TARDIS would never land anywhere outright lethal." He stepped

beside her, sheltering her under the black canopy of the umbrella, protecting her from the worst of the wind and rain. “But would it be too much to ask for you to at least peek through the door to ensure you’re suitably dressed for the weather?”

“Where are we?” she asked, ignoring him as she looked around at the gloomy terrain and the rolling black clouds above them.

“An island at the end of the world,” replied the Doctor, staring moodily out at the sea.

“Sounds lovely.”

“It’s a place so remote, that its extraordinarily dangerous inhabitants are no danger to anybody else on Earth.”

“Yep, that sounds like the kind of place you’d visit.”

“Doesn’t it just.” The Doctor grinned, leading the way up the path, forcing her to keep up with him if she wanted to remain dry. “This is where Medusa has her lair.”

“What?” Clara blinked. “Medusa! With the whole snake hair-do? Turning people to stone with a glance? Surely she’s a myth?”

“I always used to think so, but then everything changed.” The Doctor tapped the side of his head. “There have always been those who said she represented a real event: the overthrowing of an ancient, mask-wearing priestess. They’re wrong of course – she’s a great big snake. Just up here.”

Clara stopped. She stood still, watching the Doctor scurry eagerly up the path, carrying the umbrella away, until eventually he realized she had gone. He turned back to look at her.

“We’re actually hurrying towards danger because of the *weather*?” she asked, shivering as the cold rain stung.

“Don’t be a complete pudding brain.” The Doctor slapped a hand against his head in despair. “My former self and Perseus are about to encounter Medusa. We have to get there before them, otherwise it’ll all go horribly wrong again.”

Without waiting to see if she followed, he turned and hurried further up the path, leaving her standing in the rain.

“That’s still running into danger!”

She watched him go. She kicked a stone, reluctant to follow him, but knowing that she should.

“Who was that excitable fellow, hmm?”

The voice, which had been spoken from beside her, sent shivers down her spine. She had heard it before, on Trenzalore, when she had stepped into the Doctor’s timestream.

She slowly turned to face the figure.

An old man, with a mane of white hair which hung almost to his shoulders, was standing on a sidepath. He was dressed in a smart black jacket, with a black necktie wrapped over the top of the collar of his white shirt, not unlike the outfit the Doctor wore when we he pretended to be respectable. Stopping to take a breath, the elderly man held his umbrella over her, as he leaned on his cane for support.

“He doesn’t look like a Greek,” the old man observed, as he looked her up and down. “But then neither do you. That get-up is utterly impractical for this terrain and weather.”

“Oh my stars.” Clara grinned at him. “You’re just like him!”

It was the Doctor. She knew it was. Not her Doctor, nor the younger version whom she had originally encountered, but one from a very long time ago. One who, despite being countless centuries younger, seemed impossibly old in comparison to the man she knew.

“That was the Doctor. That was you.”

“Really?” The old man stared up the path, blinking in disbelief. “That fool?”

“He’s no fool.” Clara paused, not feeling entirely convinced by her own words. “He just pretends to be.”

“Really? I’ve become a buffoon?” The old man sighed. “Let me give you a word of advice young lady: never meet your future self, they’re always a huge disappointment.”

“Don’t underestimate him,” she replied loyally.

The old man’s eyes narrowed with curiosity.

“And you are?”

“Clara Oswald.” She offered her hand to the old man, who looked at it in suspicion, but then shook it anyway. “I’m an English teacher, from twenty-first century Earth. I travel with him sometimes. And he thinks you’re about to make a terrible mistake.”

“Does he? My word!”

“He thinks you’re about to encounter Medusa.”

The old man stared at her.

“Yes, my dear, that’s exactly what we’re about.”

The old man glanced back down the sidepath, to where two figures were picking their way between the rocks, their passage made easier by a break in the rain. The first was a young man, with bronzed skin and athletic build, carrying a sword and shield, his face partly obscured by a metal helmet. The second figure was a young woman, with a bob of long-fringed dark hair, wearing a simple, dark sleeveless dress.

“This young fellow is Perseus.” The Doctor nodded at the man, while shaking the droplets from his umbrella and folding it away, dropping it into one of his pockets. “I know you may find that difficult to credit, as an educated woman such as yourself would doubtless regard him as a myth, but I have discovered many of the Greek legends are true. I was there at Troy; I was inside the wooden horse. I met Odysseus. It was as if he were conjured straight out of the words of Homer. I hope you don’t find it too much of a struggle to accept that such heroes of legend are real?”

The old man raised an eyebrow, ready to judge her.

Clara shrugged.

“Nope, I’ve met Robin Hood and Santa. I can believe in Perseus too.”

The old man scowled.

“There’s no reason to be facetious!”

"I wasn't!"

"My own destiny and that of Perseus appear to be intertwined." The old man tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I can think of no other reason why, in an infinite cosmos, I would have crossed his path a second time."

"Um, the Alpha TARDIS?"

"Pardon?"

"Nothing," replied Clara cautiously, not sure how much she could tell the man, without there being serious danger of her being told off for it. "Spoilers."

"Spoil her? Spoil whom? My dear, you're just spouting nonsense. We can't dilly-dally around here. Let's get on with the task at hand." The old man pointed up the path with his cane. "Let us see what this future fellow has to say! Let us meet Medusa, shall we. Hmm?"

The old man strode on up the hill, his cane rising and falling with each step, as he marched upwards. Perseus followed in his wake, barely glancing at her as he passed, his muscled arm holding his sword at the ready.

The young girl spared her a look.

"I have met both Zeus and Perseus today." The girl nodded her head timidly. "Would I be correct to assume you are Athena?"

Clara laughed.

"No, no I'm just Clara. I can assure you, I'm no goddess. You?"

"Nobody of importance."

"Yes, well, I guess it's easy to feel like that if you're hanging around with a legendary hero and a Time Lord. Come on, we'd better catch up with them, or we'll probably miss them saving the universe or something."

Clara hurried up the slope, the girl at her heels, keen not to miss the inevitable meeting of the two incarnations of the Doctor. In her experience, such events were always worth watching, just to see him arguing with himself.

The white-haired old man had stopped at the top of the path, his attention focused on a statue that stood overlooking the sea. Its features had been weathered away to nothing.

"A victim of Medusa," he mused, tapping the stone with his cane.

Perseus, not so easily distracted, was pointing ahead of them towards a dark hole in the rugged cliff face.

"There is the lair of the Gorgon," he muttered in a hushed tone.

"Remember what I told you." The elderly Doctor waved a finger at the young man. "You must look into the reflection in your shield: that way whatever powers she has, will simply be reflected away."

Perseus nodded as he advanced towards the cave.

"No!" A voice boomed, its distinct Scottish tones instantly recognizable to Clara's ear. The Doctor loomed out of the darkened cave, his most smug grin filling his face, as he gestured with a thumb over his shoulder. "Rather than sneaking up on her and murdering her, why don't you come and meet her face-to-face. As, what with my all shouting, I've just woken her up."

"What are you doing, sir!" The elderly Doctor stamped the tip of his cane against the rocky path. "The legend of Perseus is quite clear on what happened here. These events are remembered forever – we dare not change them."

“Oh, listen to him.” The Doctor cast a sideways glance at Clara. “Let me give you a word of advice: never meet an earlier version of yourself, they’re always hugely disappointing. He’d just let events unfold. He wouldn’t even dare to try and change them. Well, I do dare.”

The old man scowled.

“Is that what I have become? Is this my future? Do I end up as nothing more than a time meddler? I have never been so disappointed in my own behaviour!”

“That’s because you’re a muppet.” The Doctor growled at his previous incarnation, facing him nose-to-nose, both their faces stern and unsympathetic.

“I’m not sure I understand your comment,” the old man muttered after a pause.

“See!” The Doctor threw his arms wide in disbelief. “Why would I listen to you? You’ve not even heard of the Muppets. It’s an insult, by the way, although I’m not sure why; I’ve always found them delightful. But you, you prance around the universe, pretending you know what you’re doing, pretending you’re in control, but you’re not. You know nothing. You’re a child compared to me.”

The old man, clearly not used to being spoken to in such a manner, completely failed to control his temper.

Illustration by Carolyn Edwards

“How dare you, sir! You are breaking the First Law of Time just by being here. Have we become so arrogant, so wilful, that we have forgotten to uphold even the most basic principles of our people!”

“There you go again, throwing around rules, pretending you understand them. You pretend you can fly the TARDIS, but you can’t. You even pretend the TARDIS is your ship, but it’s stolen. You’re nothing but a lost little boy, a runaway and a thief! So believe me when I tell you, you don’t know what you’re doing and you’re on the brink of making a terrible mistake!”

The old man’s jaw jutted out in anger and defiance, his eyes bulging with rage.

“What mistake, sir?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“The real threat on this island isn’t Medusa, it’s the statues.”

The old man blinked in confusion.

Clara felt her smile fall from her face.

“You don’t recognize them, because you’ve never met them before. You were never supposed to meet them. Not yet.” The Doctor tapped the side of his head. “But someone is messing with our timeline, and I recognized them the moment the memory formed.”

Clara turned to face the ocean, looking for the statue, which she had assumed was one of Medusa’s victims. It was closer than she expected. It was no longer facing the sea. The crumbling fingers were reaching towards her. The wings were missing, reduced to stony lumps on its back, but she still recognized it.

“Weeping Angels!” she shrieked, retreating rapidly from the stone hands.

“Hmm?” The old man glanced at the statue, his face filling with surprise when he noticed the statue had moved. “But such things only exist in the ancient legends of our people.”

“My god, I never realized I was such a slow learner.” The Doctor rolled his eyes in despair when he saw the bewilderment on the old man’s face. He pointed at the tanned young man with the sword. “You’re on a quest with Perseus. Legends don’t just come from nowhere!”

Clara tried to keep her eyes on the statue, but found her gaze torn when she spotted a second stone figure crouched on the rocky hillside.

“There’s more of them, Doctor!” she called.

“I should think the island’s full of them.”

“Fantastic. You couldn’t have mentioned this earlier?”

“Medusa. Statues. Mistake.” He shrugged. “I thought it was obvious.”

Perseus raced towards the nearest statue, swinging his sword against it, the blade ringing out as it harmlessly rebounded off the hard surface.

“No, Perseus, seriously pal, they’re stone.” The Doctor pulled him back, wrenching the sword from his grip and casting it into the sea. “Hitting them with a sword isn’t going to cut it. They move when you’re not looking at them, so you need to keep your eyes on them at all times. Don’t even blink.”

The old man harrumphed.

“Don’t even blink! What ridiculous advice is that? That’s not even possible!”

“How about this then?” The Doctor pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “Getchya selves into the cave if you want to live.”

Clara did not hesitate; she knew when danger loomed. She was always better off following the Doctor’s advice, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. She grabbed the hand of the quiet young girl beside her and pulled her towards the cave, even though it meant taking her eyes off the Angels for a number of seconds.

She found herself once again plunging into darkness.

The move felt counterintuitive, as she was now effectively blind, leaving her unable to even see the Angels. She could hear the others clattering across the rocky floor of the cave behind her. She could see the silhouettes of two statues standing in the circle of light that formed the mouth of the cave.

“Fool!” The old man shouted. “We cannot see a thing in here. Based on how fast those things move when unobserved, they’ll be on us in moments.”

“Not at all.” A light flared in the darkness, as the Doctor struck a match, revealing his grinning face. “This island is a prison for the Angels. If they try to leave, they sink without a trace, getting crushed by the pressure of the ocean. In the meantime, it’s the constant gaze of their jailer that depletes their power. She’ll keep us safe.”

Something vast uncoiled in the darkness behind Clara, its lizard-like head moving towards their meagre circle of match-light. From the top of its head sprouted two dozen snake-like appendages, each ending in a smaller head, with its own tiny mouth and eyes.

“Meet Medusa!” hissed the Doctor. “She can see in the infrared spectrum, meaning the darkness doesn’t help the Angels. She has almost sixty eyes, providing her with constant all-round vision. Each of the smaller heads, having their own separate brain, can even continue to watch while she is sleeping. The Angels can’t get near her. Under her constant gaze, forced to repeatedly petrify, they’re slowly decaying to nothing.”

In the gloom, Clara felt the young girl squeeze her hand, evidently terrified of the lizard-like monster slithering amongst them.

“Fascinating!” cried the old man as he peered closer, mesmerized by the countless tiny black eyes that stared back at him. “And so when Perseus kills her, these Peeping Angel things will be freed.”

“Weeping, not Peeping.” The Doctor hung his head. “They’re not Peeping Angels.”

“Are you sure?” The old man frowned. “They keep peeping out from behind their hands.”

“I’m certain. Regardless, I can’t be responsible for the death of a creature as noble as Medusa. She is here performing a service. The first time you encountered her, in the original history, she did not even defend herself against your attack. I still have her head. I’m here to stop it from happening.”

The old man shook his head.

“We cannot rewrite history. Not one line.”

"You're wrong about that. It's a good guideline, to prevent countless problems, but it's not technically true." The Doctor grinned at his former self's frowning face. "There are fixed points in history, which even we dare not change, for fear of the consequences. However, this is not one of them. This becomes mythology, remembered only as legend. There are very few witnesses, so the events themselves are less important than how they are retold, which gives us a certain amount of wriggle room. We don't have to murder her just to protect your principles."

The old man stiffened, a hand clasping one of his lapels as he considered the accusation levelled against him.

"Well, of course, I was also hoping to use any venom she had to extract a drug for Steven's wound," the old man blustered defensively, as the match-light fluttered and failed. "Many snakes' venom can be used to affect blood pressure and coagulation. It may have made a treatment for his blood poisoning."

Another match flared in the darkness, the Doctor's face suddenly pale as he glanced around their little group, until his eyes fell on the quiet girl who still clutched Clara's hand.

"Whom, exactly, are you travelling with?"

The Doctor's voice had gained a haunted quality.

"You don't remember?" The old man frowned at the flickering flame.

"These events may be happening now, but for me they happened over a thousand years ago. My memory is a mess. I don't remember everything I've done. I don't remember everyone I've met. People never were my strong suit."

"Steven Taylor travels with me now, but he was wounded in Troy. His condition is worsening by the hour, which is why I came here in search of a cure."

"And?"

"Katarina." The old man waved a hand in the general direction of the dark-haired girl.

"It is true." The girl nodded her head demurely. "I do travel with the great one, through the beyond, in his magical temple. We are on the way to the place of perfection."

"I had forgotten how innocent you were." The Doctor's bulging eyes glistened in the match-light, his gaze unwaveringly focused on the girl, as if everything else was suddenly lost in the darkness. "I had forgotten how little you understood what was happening."

"Yet here I am." Katarina smiled. "Blessed to walk through history. To meet gods and heroes."

The old man nodded.

"You see, to her and people of the ancient world, events here were more than legend: they were considered history – they were the basis of an entire civilization."

"One man is remembered, yet her city and and everyone in it, they are forgotten."

"I am aware of that." The old man bristled. "I left my dear Vicki in that city. The city that becomes regarded as nothing more than myth. Lost to history, all

of its people forgotten, except for Katarina, who is living proof that they once existed."

The match, having burnt all the way up to the Doctor's fingers, flickered brightly for a moment and then died.

"When she came aboard the ship," the old man muttered in the darkness, "she was spared the slaughter at Troy. But I do worry that her fate will catch up with her."

"It does." The Doctor's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"So you cannot always cheat time?"

"Not always."

"I see," the old man replied sadly. "Well, my dear fellow, whatever the future may hold, should we not be worrying about the monsters that are outside right now?"

"That's the first sensible thing you've said," the Doctor replied, fumbling with the matches in the darkness. "But this has left me wondering: what's this all for? What is the point of someone changing my past? I still feel very much in the dark about that."

Trapped in a cave without light, protected by a mythological monster, with a host of Weeping Angels at their heels, he still found time for puns. Clara could imagine his deadpan face. He struck another match.

Medusa hissed, pushing through them, slithering back up the cave towards the frozen Angels. The creature paused for a moment, her forked tongue flickering, as she spat a globule of liquid at the outstretched arms of one of the monsters. The acid sizzled on the stone, breaking down the surface and turning it white, scarring the arms and causing two of the fingers to crumble away.

"Oh, what a magnificent creature." The Doctor applauded, emerging into the light, as he ran over to admire the damage. "She even has a way to punish and subdue her prisoners!"

The old man nodded, watching Medusa slither down the hill, heading back towards the TARDIS, obviously intent on escorting them off the island.

"The infinite variety of nature is truly inspiring," he agreed. "She truly has something for every occasion. She was worth saving, provided you can ensure there are no consequences. But regrettably, I cannot make a treatment for Steven from such a chemical."

"No. It's not the reason you were sent here."

"Does there need to be a reason? Despite the coincidence of running into Perseus, I have always believed my journeys to be quite random."

"Not this time. Whoever stole the Alpha must have had a motive for sending you here." The Doctor shrugged, casting a sideways glance at Perseus and Katarina as they strolled down the hill after the serpent. "So the correct question to ask is: what's the purpose of revisiting the past?"

Clara, intrigued by their conversation, moved to join them, but found herself jerked abruptly to halt.

There were stone fingers on her arm.

She spun hurriedly, realizing her mistake. She had put herself between Medusa and the Angel, creating a tiny blind spot. It was the smallest of gaps, the narrowest of opportunities, but the Angel had swiftly taken advantage of it.

She could see the acid scars on its forearms.

In the time it had taken her to turn around, its broken three-fingered hand had moved to her throat. It's weathered and featureless face had opened a fang-filled mouth.

She shrieked in panic.

"Clara!" The Doctor's voice was filled with alarm. "No, not this! Not again!"

She turned to look at him, as he ran wildly across the ground between them, knowing he was her only hope.

He blinked.

The world warped, spun and vanished.

Clara tumbled headlong into the infinite abyss of time and space.

Next Episode
THE END OF A LEGEND

The Redemption of Vequazon

by Nick Walters

Welcome, visitor. Do come in. Please follow me through to the courtyard, but do take care to mind the step. I am glad to observe that you admire my roses. I have put a lot of work into cultivating them. Please, take a seat. Yes, it is hot today. This planetoid has an elliptical orbit, and we are currently just approaching perihelion, and believe me, it will get hotter in the coming cycles. Would you like some refreshments? Yes? Robots – please fetch a carafe of iced lemon water and a bowl of jenniberries. Thank you. Yes, I do reside here quite alone, except for my robots. I acquired them from a visiting Kaldorian merchant. They provide for all my needs and carry out all necessary maintenance, except for the gardening. No, I do not get lonely. Please, with respect, gentle visitor, confine your questions to these historic ruins which you have come a very long way to see.

As you know from the guidebook, this was once the castle of a powerful and feared warlord. Now it is a crumbling ruin with only a few habitable rooms, and these splendid gardens which you so admire, gardens which it is my job to tend. Thank you, I do my best. Why do I live here, alone, except for the robots? Why, I am the curator of this place! No, robots could not do as good a job as I. I sense a certain impudence in your manner, O visitor, and beg to request that you show due respect to such an ancient ruin. By which I do not mean myself, though yes, I am old, and well past my prime. That is why I have taken this position. It suits one such as I. Here I have ample time for contemplation, and tending the garden provides the gentle exercise my ancient frame requires. What – what makes you ask such a question?! No, of course it was not my castle! I am just its humble curator. What I once was, is no concern of yours!

Many apologies, O visitor. I did not mean to raise my voice. Now if I could turn your attention to the detail of the stonework on the parapet behind you… Why again do you ask that question? What do you mean – it is not a question? You know? How? No one knows! I have kept it secret for—

Ah. And now that secret is out, from my own withered, treacherous lips.

You have kind eyes, O visitor, though they gaze out from beneath fierce brows. They seem to hold great wisdom and compassion. I feel somehow that I can trust you. And, yes, it would be a great relief, after so many centuries, to tell my story, at last. To unburden my soul. Then my redemption would be complete. So, yes, this was once my castle, and I was once a mighty warlord. You may have heard my name. You may once have trembled in fear of it. You may have marched to war in the name of it, or in opposition to it. You may have cursed it. You may have worshipped it. Either way, it's not important now.

I live in this ruined castle – my castle, one of many – and tend to the roses and other plants in this beautiful garden. But, primarily, the roses. I love their colour, the silken lie of their petals, the sharp truth of their thorns. My life is, now, dedicated to them, not to war.

Yes, I was Lord Vequazon, Supreme Commander of the Nixxine Horde.

I once fell foul of a vengeful demon.
And was later saved by a merciful angel.
Now I am simply Vequazon, the curator, tender of roses.
And now, at last, it is time to tell my story.

Centuries ago, I ruled an empire. Yes, it is hard to believe, looking at me now – but this frail elderly form you see before you was once sleek and powerful like all of the Nixxine Horde. This soft leathery skin was once a hard and shiny armour of ebon chitin. These limbs, now mere twigs, were once mighty pistons of fearsome power. This head, still proud, yes, but withered with age, once bore a mighty crown of horns, and in the cold season I must wear a woolly hat to keep out the chill. These eyes, dim and rheumy and pale as the petals of this rose, once shone like twin red stars – yes, you get the picture, I see.

Starting from our hiveworld of Nixxidom, we spread out and conquered our home galaxy, system by system, subjugating, enslaving or slaughtering all who crossed our path. We were rapacious, unstoppable, like an out-of-control plague, an epidemic raging across the stars. Nothing and no one could stand in our way. We had the will and the weaponry to conquer and destroy – so that is what we did. Why? You ask me why? A good question, and one I have pondered over the decades. The answer is quite simple: why does water flow downhill, why does the fire consume the forest? Because that's what it does, and conquest came as easily to us as any natural function you care to mention. Nixxidom was a harsh, rocky, stormy world, and we simply evolved to survive. Adversity made us strong, and when we had conquered our hiveworld, we simply took the next natural steps and expanded, and expanded, until the entire galaxy was ours.

Until one day.

We had reached the Ghojii Cascade and had established a Battle Nest above the capital world of Ghojii Prime. By this time, I had risen through the ranks by trial of combat to become Supreme Commander of the Nixxine Horde. I had seen off many challenges, and knew one day I would be bested and replaced, but for now I was supreme. It was not, however, a Nixxine challenger who ended my reign.

Our plans for Ghojii Prime conformed to our usual methods: wipe out the enemy's communications and intelligence infrastructure via a planet-wide EMP, bomb the chief population centres to oblivion, introduce pathogens and mutagens into the ecosystem, and then swarm across the planet mopping up survivors. These we would slaughter, torture, enslave or consume, depending on our requirements. The Ghojii were mammals, so we planned to stock up our larders. There was an extra objective for this planet, as we badly needed another War Hive to manufacture our munitions and materiel.

As I was about to give the order to activate the EMP and launch the first of our plague missiles, however, something happened. Right in front of me in the Command Chamber of the Battle Nest, a strange, blue box appeared as if out of nowhere, accompanied by a roaring and trumpeting cacophony that resounded around the ribbed chitin walls of the Chamber. Immediately, a dozen Nixxine

warriors clustered around it and blasted it with their plasma rifles. This had no effect, so they blasted it again, and again. Still the blue box remained unblemished. I ordered my warriors to stand by and approached the strange object. Was it some device of the Ghojii, some weapon, perhaps? But the Ghojii were weak, agrarian, goat-like beings whose level of technology could never have produced such a device, capable of teleportation and able to withstand our plasma beams. No, I ruminated as I walked around it, looking over its unnatural array of regular panels and straight edges, this was something else. Whatever it was – the sheer effrontery of it!

I stood back and ordered a squad of my noble warriors to have at it with the Z-beams.

No effect.

The blue box remained completely undamaged.

Hissing with anger I strode up to it and pummelled its blue panels with my fist. "What is the meaning of this?!" I roared.

To my surprise, a door in the box opened, and a humanoid figure emerged. "I've come to stop you, Vequazon. Your kind have gone too far. It's over."

I spat. "What?! What can you, one being, do against the might of the Nixxine Horde?"

"What can I do? What can't I do? I'm the Doctor." The figure emerged fully from the box, closing the door behind it. Immediately, two of my warriors rushed to open the door, but to no avail. The humanoid strode towards me. It wore a long cloak the shade of stripped bark, and dark eyes gazed out from its smooth humanoid face, which was topped by a frivolous crop of hair the colour of freshly-turned earth. "You and your kind have overstepped your boundaries. You've become too greedy, and now you are upsetting the balance of things. You'll go on and on spreading death and destruction and misery until you meet a force equal to you. Then there will be war, with more death and destruction and misery, and innocents caught in the crossfire. You will survive the war having developed better weaponry, and on and on it will go. Well, I'm going to stop you now, today, before you cause even just one more death."

Every plasma rifle and Z-beam lance was trained on the Doctor. A simple gesture from me would have ensured his immediate death, but I held back, fascinated by the arrogant stupidity of this clearly insane being. "And how, Doctor, do you plan to do that?"

The Doctor glared at me, and for the first time I glimpsed the power in that dark gaze. "By asking you to stop."

Raucous laughter echoed around the Command Chamber. I raised both arms to quell it, noting with pride that, despite their amusement, each and every one of my Nixxine warriors still kept their weapons trained on the ridiculous figure of the Doctor.

"Doctor, you amuse me! But now – prepare to die!"

There was a susurration of expectant hisses and cackles from my loyal warriors.

The expression on the Doctor's face just then will stay with me always. A look of sadness, pity, regret – and yet, utter, utter contempt. He said, softly, "Then you give me no choice."

I gave the order to fire – but the Doctor slipped with surprising nimbleness back inside his blue box. The plasma bolts and Z-beams slammed into its impenetrable blue surface, again leaving not a single mark.

"See how the coward retreats!" I crowed over the dying fizzles and crackles of the weapons fire.

Then something strange and horrible happened.

All my proud, noble Nixxine warriors reeled as if stunned by a shockwave. Some screamed and threw their weapons down, whilst others brandished them wildly, firing off shots into the ribbed walls and vaulted ceiling of the Command Chamber. They all then began scampering around like things possessed, leaping and cavorting, shrieking and cachinnating – laughing! I recoiled as a warrior bounded up to me and thrust his face into mine, babbling gibberish. I shoved the poor afflicted wretch away and staggered back towards my throne.

"What is this?!" I bellowed.

The Doctor emerged from his blue box. There was cold triumph in his eyes, his smile, the set of his jaw. He observed my proud warriors disporting themselves with a complete lack of dignity, and he grinned a wide, terrifying grin, which he turned on me. "It's playtime, Vequazon! Join in!"

A Nixxine warrior bounded up to me, chittering like a lunatic. I cuffed him around the face and he scampered away, whimpering. "What have you done?" I roared.

"I've sent a psych-pulse through the collective unconsciousness of the Nixxine species," said the Doctor matter-of-factly. "I've regressed them, in their minds, to children. All the Nixxines in the galaxy, wherever they are, are now like this – playful, harmless creatures. Your reign of terror is over."

"Whaaat?!" I marched over to the Doctor, intending to smash his puny humanoid frame into splattering oblivion – but he produced a silver wand from beneath his cloak, and I was stopped in my tracks, as if all my limbs had frozen solid. All I could do was breathe, and that with difficulty.

"I've spared you their indignity, Vequazon. I have a different punishment in store for you."

I stood helpless before the Doctor, O visitor. Helpless before my defeater, the Doctor, and right there and then I vowed that whatever happened, whatever his punishment was, I would escape, hunt him down, and destroy him.

My punishment, gentle visitor, was more prosaic than that visited on my poor, once-proud Nixxine warriors. The Doctor simply chained me up in the basement of one of my castles – yes, indeed, this very one in whose garden we now sit on this pleasant sunny day – and left me to die. He must have known that my biomechanical enhancements eliminated the need for sustenance and extended the basic Nixxine lifespan. He must have known that I would live, imprisoned,

for centuries – until, eventually, my aged body failed. He must have known all this, but left me there – left me here – anyway.

But come, gentle visitor, let me show you where the Doctor chained me up and left me to die. Yes, down these steps. No, it wasn't a dungeon, it was a wine cellar. This castle was one of my holiday retreats and was never used for military purposes, until the Doctor turned it into my prison. Here we are.

And this is how I got here.

Paralyzed, I had no choice but to allow the Doctor to manhandle my body onto a trolley and wheel me inside his blue box. Though my mind boiled with rage, I was amazed to see that the box was impossibly larger on the inside than it appeared to be from without. Some sort of dimensional trickery, I pondered, momentarily distracted from the agony and humiliation of my defeat. This Doctor must indeed be a powerful being to wield such technology as this blue box, the silver wand and the device that had reduced my Nixxine warriors to the status of babes in arms. What wonders could not I, Lord Vequazon, perform with such advanced science as this! But I was paralyzed, I couldn't even struggle – just watch impotently as the Doctor walked over to the controls. His hands moved over the instruments, and the blue column that rose to the ceiling began to pulse and glow. The Doctor stared into this column, his brown-cloaked back to me, not even giving me the dignity of his attention. A few minutes passed, and then the Doctor turned to me and, not even meeting my gaze, wheeled me back out of the impossible blue box, and I found myself here, in my wine cellar.

See that wall? That is where the blue box materialized, centuries ago.

See those pillars? That is where he bound me in chains of dwarf star alloy.

And after he had done so, he turned and left without a word, his blue box fading away to nothing, trumpeting and thundering its triumph.

Leaving me totally alone.

No, O visitor, there were no other people in the castle, or on the planetoid. The castle had been mothballed, its staff sent away, and I had not visited it for a decade. It was due for a refit after the Ghojii campaign. That is presumably why the Doctor chose it for my prison tomb.

The paralysis wore off after a few hours, and I struggled against my bonds, but to no avail. Not even my biomechanically enhanced body was strong enough to break chains forged from dwarf star alloy. So I screamed out my rage until I was hoarse, and spat, and howled, and cursed the name of the Doctor, not so much for what he had done to me, but what he had done to the Nixxine Horde – my proud warriors – my people – reducing them, all of them, to the level of infancy. It was the thought of not being able to do anything to save them, even were I to break free, that tormented me the most. So I raged and howled and wept for hours until I finally slept, worn out by grief.

When I woke, I had calmed down slightly, and considered my situation. It was hopeless, so I raged and howled some more, and pointless though it was, it felt good to vent my feelings. When I calmed down again, I remembered that one of my incisors contained a tiny but potent signalling device for use if ever I became trapped or captive. I set it off, not thinking for a second that anyone

would ever come in answer to it. My Nixxine brethren could now not even understand it, let alone respond. I shrieked anew my hatred for the Doctor, vowing once more to hunt him down and carve him into steaming chunks. It was only these thoughts of revenge that kept me from going insane in the first days, weeks and months of my incarceration. I would render myself giddy with lust, drooling as I imagined the exquisite tortures I would perform upon the Doctor's body. I would eke his torment out for months, first removing his skin inch by agonizing inch, and then set to work on his limbs and organs, introducing each to shattering galaxies of unimaginable pain. I would have the Doctor, or what was left of him, curling and writhing like a grub in his own bodily fluids, begging for death. And then I would slowly nurse him back to health, and begin again.

Such delicious fantasies kept me going for the first part of my imprisonment. As time wore on, my mind began to turn to other matters, other places, other times. I looked back on my early days, scampering free in the caverns of the hiveworld. My initiation as a Nixxine warrior and my training under the great Zebbivis. My rise through the ranks by trial of combat. How I had slain my strongest opponent, Xaranav, and the drinking vessel I had fashioned from his cranial carapace. My rise to Supreme Commander of the Nixxine Horde. My true love and my eventual Queen, the tall, dark, angular and beautiful Jenpernal. Her brave death in the final victorious battle of the war with the Valethske. The siege of Ghojii Prime. My defeat at the hands of the Doctor.

The Doctor, the Doctor, the Doctor! Always my thoughts would return to him, no matter which pathway they took into the past. And with those thoughts, all the rage and hatred would return, and I would yell anew my lust for his protracted and messy death.

As the years and decades passed, these thoughts would recede, further and further like a tide, leaving eventually only a sandy, barren shore. And what did I find, on that great, wide expanse? To say the least, gentle visitor, I was greatly surprised.

And so the decades turned into centuries, and one day, two hundred and sixty-three years, twenty-nine days, five hours and fifteen minutes after the last lock was turned on my manacles, I received a visitation. At first I thought I was dreaming, or hallucinating, but I was awake, and sober, though now weak with age. My senses were not as sharp as once they had been, but there was no mistaking that dreadful sound, that terrible, regular shape. It was the demon Doctor's blue box, fading and trumpeting into existence right before my wizened eyes, in the exact same spot that it had vanished over two-and-a-half centuries earlier!

At first, I wept with relief, believing that my tormentor had returned at last to finish his job and put me out of my misery, or – I blush to tell you, O visitor, the vain stupidity of hope – release me!

The door of the blue box opened and a figure emerged.

It was not the Doctor!

The Doctor, my vanquisher, my deadliest foe, was a thin humanoid with a long brown cloak and dark eyes. This newcomer wore a cloak of many colours,

the costume of a court jester or entertainer, which even in the dark dankness of the cellar shone bright and brash. This newcomer's topknot was the colour of straw, and it curled whilst the Doctor's lay straight. This newcomer's face was rotund where the Doctor's was sharp. This newcomer's eyes shone with intelligence and power – but that was the only connection between him and the Doctor.

Could this be another blue box? Could there be a whole fleet of such objects? But even as I formed these thoughts, I knew it was the same one.

Another figure emerged from the blue box, this one smaller, slimmer, and female. Its face was bright and inquisitive, but its eyes showed fear when its gaze fell upon me. I must have looked fearsome, even in my aged, emaciated condition.

The two figures approached.

"This seems to be the source of the distress call, Peri," said the male.

"What is it, Doctor? It looks – dead."

The male's next words were lost to me as my mind blazed and thrummed with shock. The Doctor, the Doctor, the Doctor – the female had called him the Doctor!

"Doctor?!" I cried.

The female gasped and stepped back, but the male – the Doctor?! – rubbed his hands together. "No, not dead, Peri – very much alive!" He then began an examination of my body whilst my mind still raced and whirled and echoed with the name of the Doctor. Could – could this be the same being who had imprisoned me? Or perhaps another of the same race, and "Doctor" was a title? Or perhaps the Doctor was of a chameleonic species who could change their form?

If this was, somehow, the same Doctor – then now was the chance to take my revenge!

Ah, but recall the beach, dear visitor. That's where I now stood, and all thoughts of revenge had left me, washed away by the tides of the years.

"Some sort of biomechanical life form," the Doctor was saying whilst the female still regarded me with fear; less now, but still a scintilla of fear in her eyes.

I was once more shocked. Did he not know me? Surely he would remember his victory over me, remember imprisoning me here? Surely he would at least know the name of my species? This could therefore not be the same Doctor. And yet something in his bearing, his manner, reminded me of that other Doctor from so long ago.

He was speaking directly to me now: "It was you who sent this distress call?"

"Yes, Doctor." It was strange to say that name after so much time.

"Who put you down here?" His voice hardened. "And why?"

You. You put me down here and left me to rot, you lump of effluent! You robbed my people of their dignity and left me helpless to mourn them! That was what part of my mind wanted to scream into that proud, cherubic face. But the greater part of me now stood on that empty, silent beach. "There was a war,

Doctor, centuries ago. I was a leader, on the losing side. The victor chained me here, in my own castle, to rue my defeat."

"And now you want to be freed, so you can take revenge?"

I looked from the Doctor to the female. "No, I do not seek revenge." It was strange to hear myself say those words, stranger still to know they were sincere.

"How can I be sure of that?" said the Doctor.

"He seems genuine enough," said the female, but there was doubt in her voice, and still that scintilla of fear shone in her eyes.

"How can I trust you?"

"All I can give you is my word."

"Come on, Doctor. He looks old and tired… and he did send a distress call."

"Which could have been a trap!" crowed the Doctor. "And have I not taught you, young Perpugilliam, never to trust appearances? A Dalek may look faintly ridiculous, but both you and I know it is very, very, very far from that!" He went on in this fashion for some minutes, prancing around the cellar, gesticulating wildly, his colourful cloak flaring and flapping around him.

I locked eyes with the female, Peri, and gained a glimmer of understanding about what travelling with such a being might be like. Why did she put up with such bluster? Maybe the benefits of journeying in the blue box outweighed the demerits of this Doctor's overbearing character. Maybe the blue box was more than just a teleportation device. Maybe… And I began to work out the why and how this Doctor might not be aware of who I was and what he had done to me.

"Tell me, Doctor," I said, interrupting his flow of verbosity. "This blue box of yours. Does it travel through time?"

He whirled around to face me. "Why?"

"Yes," said Peri.

"Peri!" cried the Doctor.

"So? It does!" She glared at him, and I could see fire shining in those eyes.

He turned back to me. "And now you know that, you'll want me to take you back in time to undo your defeat! Well, I refuse! It's against all the laws of time!" He folded his arms, like a petulant infant.

"No, Doctor," I said – and it was true. The beach. What was done, was done. "I was just curious, and you have satisfied that curiosity. Or rather, you have, young Peri."

Peri smiled at me. "No problem."

"My wish is simply to be free, so I can live out the rest of my lifespan here, and tend to the gardens."

Peri's eyes widened with interest at these words.

"I'm not sure," muttered the Doctor. "This has all the trappings of a – well, of a trap."

I felt anger then, for the first time in decades – but I fought it down, knowing that it would get me nowhere. "If you do not trust my word, Doctor, trust the facts. I am old, near the end of my lifespan. Either of you alone could overpower me. I have no weapons concealed about me, nor are there any in this castle, or anywhere on this planetoid. There is no way off this little world except in your blue box. Which, if it can indeed travel through time, would surely

possess the capability to scan this planetoid to verify these facts of which I speak?"

The Doctor said nothing, merely stomped back into his blue box.

Peri looked up at me, no fear at all now in her eyes. "So, this place has gardens, huh?"

"They do indeed. This castle was once famed for them."

"And the castle used to be yours, and your enemy chained you up here? Harsh."

"Harsh indeed."

"How long have you been down here?"

I told her.

She whistled. "Wow. Guess the gardens are gonna be pretty overgrown! You're gonna have your work cut out!" She laughed.

I also laughed, for the first time since the passing of my beloved Jenpernal.

The door of the blue box opened and the Doctor stepped out. "True, true, all true," he said, waving a hand in the air.

"His story checks out?"

"Yes." The Doctor glared at me, and I knew that even then he still did not trust me.

"Well, go on, set him free."

Without a word, the Doctor produced a silver wand from within his multicoloured cloak – the same wand that had paralyzed me so long ago, but wielded by different hands – and applied it to my chains, which fell away, thudding dully to the stone floor of the cellar.

I stepped away from the pillar.

"Free," I muttered. I took another step, and almost collapsed – but it was Peri, not the Doctor, who steadied me, even though I towered over her. "I must see my garden."

Both Peri and the Doctor helped me up the steps. I emerged blinking into blazing sunlight. It was near to perihelion, judging by the brightness of the sun. I could feel the sunlight revitalizing me, pouring life into my tired old limbs. The garden was indeed overgrown, and alive with bright, blood-red blooms.

"Roses!" said Peri. "Such beautiful colours!"

She went off to examine them whilst the Doctor stood stiffly by.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said, and I meant it.

"I suppose if you were going to try anything, you'd have done it by now." He regarded me curiously. "I never asked your name…"

I was about to tell him, then I hesitated. Clearly this Doctor did not know me, so he must be a past version of that demon Doctor of old. So if I told this Doctor my name, would not that demon Doctor remember it? And remember how his past self had come to free me here? Even if I did not tell this Doctor my name, the demon Doctor would still remember the actions of his past self. So why, then, did he imprison me thus, knowing that from his point of view, he had already freed me? Knowing that my desire for revenge would be washed away by the tides of time? Was this all part of his twisted morality? Destroy my people, but let the leader go free, to salve his conscience?

Yes, it is all very confusing, O visitor – I can see you are frowning very furiously with those fierce eyebrows! And those eyes… There is something familiar about them. Beg pardon? Yes, certainly. We shall leave this place and return to the garden. No, I do not need any assistance to mount the stairs. Robots! Some fresh iced lemon water, please. Thank you. Now let us sit in this beautiful garden once more. Yes, it is hotter. I told you it would get hotter as we near perihelion. Peri… ha!

Now, where was I? Oh yes – deliberating over whether or not to tell the Doctor my name. In the end, I decided that I may as well tell the Doctor who I was. "I am Lord Vequazon, Supreme Commander of the Nixxine Horde. Or at least, I was."

Not a flicker of recognition. My theory was right – this was a past version of the demon Doctor.

"Remember that name, Doctor."

The Doctor frowned at me curiously.

Peri came back to join us. "You really have got a heck of a lot of work to do!"

"Work I shall enjoy."

I accompanied them back into the cellar, where I watched them re-enter the blue box. The Doctor shot another curious glare as he withdrew inside, whilst Peri gave me a smile and a wave, both of which I returned. The blue box faded, roaring away again. That was the last I ever saw of it, the Doctor and Peri.

I walked back up the stairs, slowly, but on my own, back out into the sun to begin my work. I was no longer in chains, or on that barren beach, but in my garden. The one in which we now sit, O gentle visitor. Thank you, I do like to think that I have done a good job, especially with the roses.

Now you must leave, you say? Your craft is berthed a few miles hence, and you must walk to it? I would accompany you, but I don't think I could walk that far. Good, you say? Oh, you meant to say goodbye. Well, goodbye, gentle visitor. Fare you well!

I was Lord Vequazon, Supreme Commander of the Nixxine Horde.

Now I am simply Vequazon, the curator, tender of roses.

I once fell foul of a vengeful demon, called the Doctor.

And was later saved by a merciful angel – your companion, Doctor, the female, Peri. If it was not for her compassion, you would have left me to die in that cellar.

Goodbye, Doctor.

Goodbye, visitor.

Your victory over me is long past, and I am at rest, but all your battles are still to be fought.

Indigo

by David McLain

Alice wiped down the countertop of table number three, and glanced backward at the clock behind the bar. It was ten minutes to eight, and in spite of herself, Alice was waiting for her favourite customer to come in. She was sure that he would. He had come in four days in a row at precisely the same time and ordered precisely the same thing. There was no reason to believe that he wouldn't come in again, although today he seemed to be late. Alice bit her thumbnail and looked at the clock again. She was probably worrying needlessly.

"Waiting for someone?" the cook asked, smiling at her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alice said, frowning. The cook was one of those older women who seemed to live for the smug satisfaction of smiling at young people in a manner that made you feel like you were seven years old. Alice disliked this intensely, but she had a long shift ahead of her, and she didn't want to stir things up. So instead of complaining, she smiled weakly, turned around and waited on the bright blue alien that had just sat down at the table in the corner.

The alien picked up a menu and stared at it. Its skin was the same shade of blue as the sky on a summer day. It had large almond-shaped eyes, and was lacking both hair and ears. Alice blinked. It wasn't an alien, it was a man in a bowler hat with a bristly mustache. My mind must be wandering, she thought. She had been reading about Martians in H.G. Wells. Something must have caused her to think of that just now. The man in the bowler hat ordered a coffee, fried eggs, tomatoes and water. Alice thanked him and retreated behind the counter. She poured the alien's coffee and brought it to him. He thanked her and took a sip. It wasn't an alien. It was a man in a bowler hat. Alice turned around and went back to wiping down the counter.

For a man who looked like he was ready for retirement, the Doctor could move surprisingly fast. He took big strides, brushing past pedestrians and moving down the street quickly. Ian Chesterton struggled to keep up with him. They were walking down a busy street in Knightsbridge. Ian recognized the era, but not the specific time. "Doctor," he asked, trying to speak loudly enough to be heard, but not so loudly that he would attract anyone else's attention, "what year is it?"

"The year is 1929," the Doctor said, without looking back. "Surely you could tell."

Ian looked around at a thin-looking man with an unshaven face and threadbare clothes. The man looked hungry and was holding out a fedora in the hopes that someone would put a few coins in it. "I had an idea," Ian admitted. "We're in the middle of the Great Slump."

"Precisely," the Doctor said.

They stopped at a street corner. Across the street, there was a long line of people with a grim look about them. They were dirty, with hungry eyes and quiet-looking faces. They were shuffling into a church in a manner that suggested that they were hoping that no one would look at them. A large banner above the church entrance proclaimed "Free Breakfast for the Unemployed."

"Doctor," Ian said, grateful that the older man had stopped momentarily. "Why are we here?"

The Doctor strode across the street without checking for cars. "Not," he insisted, "for the reason that you might think."

As they walked past the breadline, Ian tried not stare. A young boy about the age of seven looked up at him hopefully. Ian would have gladly handed the boy a pound, but he didn't have one, and even if he had, it would have had a picture of Queen Elizabeth on it anyway. Instead, he smiled faintly and looked the other way. Off the top of his head, he could think of at least a dozen problems that they could tackle while they were here. Volunteering to buy everyone a *meal* would be a start. Experience told him that with the Doctor, nothing was ever that simple. "I don't suppose," he said, as a way of ruling out the obvious, "that we're here to improve the economic crisis?"

"The events of this era are a tragedy," the Doctor agreed. "However, solving those problems is a job for the economists, politicians and leaders of this decade. Not for us."

Ian nodded. This was the answer he expected. He wondered if maybe they were here to change the future somehow. "Are we here to change the Second World War? Perhaps we could keep the Nazis from ever coming to power?"

The Doctor turned and patted the younger man on the arm, giving him a thin-lipped smile. "You're thinking too big," the Doctor insisted. "Not every trip I take is monumental. Sometimes it's the smallest trips that have the biggest effects on our lives."

The Doctor crossed another street, stepping quickly over a man who was lying in a doorway. Ian gave the man an apologetic look. "All right," Ian said, "if we're not here to stop the war or improve the economy, why are we here?"

The Doctor surveyed the street. "The TARDIS sensors tell me that there is a Xua in the area," the Doctor explained.

Ian didn't know what a Xua was, but he had a feeling it wasn't a new brand of automobile. "What's a *Xua*?" he asked.

"The Xua are an ancient race of shape-shifting time manipulators," the Doctor explained. "Excellent at blending in with the locals. They're incredibly brilliant, but with a malicious sense of humor. They love cross-temporal practical jokes."

"What do you mean?"

"They like to manipulate the web of time for the purpose of amusing themselves."

"How are we going to find this Xua?" Ian asked. "Couldn't he be anywhere?"

The Doctor surveyed the street. “I think not,” he said. “It’s eight thirty in the morning, after all. I happen to know that this particular alien likes to eat breakfast, just the same as you.”

“He could be back there in the queue,” Ian pointed out, glancing over his shoulder.

“Possibly,” the Doctor agreed. “But I think it unlikely. There’s a café over there; I suggest we investigate.”

The bell on the front door tinkled, and Alice turned to see her favourite customer walk in. He was a young man, thin and sandy haired. He probably would have been considered handsome if he had done a better job combing his hair. As usual, he wore a dark uniform and a shy, awkward smile. He sat down at the counter, picked up a menu and stared at it with a look of intense concentration.

“Good morning!” Alice said brightly, stepping up to him and pulling out her order pad. “Back again?”

“Y-yes,” the young man stammered. He seemed to be trying desperately to figure out what to do with his eyes. “Er…” he began.

“Alice,” Alice said, doing her best to help him get started.

“William,” the young man replied.

A name – that’s something anyway, Alice thought. “What can I get you?” she asked.

“Right, yes.” William looked gratefully embarrassed to have a reason to return to staring at his menu. “Kippers, toast and tea. In a bit of a rush today, I’m afraid.”

Alice frowned. “It’s all right,” she said. She spun around, put William’s order in with the cook, and then served the bright blue alien his breakfast.

The bright blue alien smiled and sipped his tea. Alice blinked again. The man in the bristly mustache looked down at his eggs hungrily. Alice shook her head. I must be tired, she thought.

The bell on the door to the restaurant tinkled again as the Doctor and Ian walked in. The Doctor scanned the room carefully. Ian glanced around; it looked like an ordinary restaurant, as far as he could see. “Do you see anything?” he asked the Doctor.

The Doctor continued to look around the room. “There!” he said. Although his voice had barely raised above a whisper, there was a certain menace to it. He had pointed at the man at the table in the far corner of the room. “The man in the bowler hat, with the bristly mustache. Look at him out of the side of your eye. Try to be casual about it, if you can.”

Ian glanced at the patron at the far booth out of the corner of his eye. The blue alien had exceptionally large eyes, a long, narrow face, and was consuming his breakfast greedily. “He’s bright blue,” Ian exclaimed.

“That’s him,” the Doctor agreed. “He’s here to change the future. I’m sure of it, but I don’t know how.”

A young waitress sat a plate of kippers down in front of a young man, who mumbled something that might have been "Thank you, miss," or might have been something else, it was difficult to tell.

"Call me Alice," the waitress said, with a tone that implied that this wasn't the first time that he had needed reminding. "Let me know if you need anything, William."

Ian watched the young man tuck in to his breakfast, ignoring the young waitress, who was obviously trying to get his attention. "The young man," Ian suggested. "William and the waitress, Alice. The alien is going to change their lives somehow."

The Doctor gave an approving nod. "Yes," he agreed. "But how?"

"Well, perhaps they're about to fall in love. Maybe they have a son who is going to grow up to be Prime Minister, or something like that?"

"I don't think so," the Doctor replied, although the disappointed-looking frown on his face seemed to imply that he wasn't sure. "We'll have to watch."

The blue alien finished his breakfast, paid the bill and walked out. Ian tried not to stare at him, but he thought he saw the alien give the Doctor a sideways look as he walked past. "Should we follow him?" Ian asked.

"Not yet," the Doctor said, studiously. He was still eyeing the young man at the counter.

William glanced at the clock on the wall. He signaled the waitress for the bill, dropped some money on the table and headed straight for the door. He was in a hurry now, and didn't give the other customers as much as a nod when pushed past them. Instead he went out the door, stepped out on the street and tripped over the large blue foot that was sticking out from behind the doorframe. William went down, face first. As he fell, he put his hands up, defending his face from the ensuing blow. His palms connected with the concrete, twisting his ankle in a way that looked unnatural.

"Aghhh!" he shouted. The Doctor and Ian came running out after him. William turned and looked at the bright blue alien that had tripped him. The alien grinned at him wickedly. William blinked and shook his head from side to side. Ian got the impression that William was trying to decide whether he was looking at a bright blue alien, or a man in a bowler hat with a bristly mustache. "Oy!" William shouted, giving the man in the bowler hat a dirty look. The man gave him a little nod, and then spun around in the other direction.

Ian was already helping William to his feet. "Do you want me to go after him?" Ian asked, watching the blue alien take off down the street.

The Doctor turned and watched the blue alien running off into the distance. He shook his head. "Whatever damage he was planning to do, he's done it already," he insisted. He turned to look at the young man. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"No," William replied, trying to smile bravely. He attempted to put his foot down on the pavement and winced. "My ankle," he said. "I think it's broken. I'd better go and see a doctor."

"I am a Doctor," the Doctor insisted. He bent over and stared at the young man's foot. Ian wondered how much the Doctor actually *knew* about medicine.

"Am I all right?" William asked.

The Doctor looked up at him and frowned. "You'll live," he said. "Please, it's terribly important. Where were you going?"

William stared at the Doctor as though this was the diagnostic equivalent of asking a man with cancer if he'd ever seen a Charlie Chaplin movie. "I was on my way to a meeting," he answered. "I'm already late."

This seemed to satisfy the Doctor in a way that nothing else so far had. "Young man, we need to get you to that meeting," he insisted.

Ian put the man's arm around his shoulder. "Ian," he said, thinking that this might be an appropriate time to introduce himself. "William, is it?"

William tried to smile again, although his expression was still pained. "That's right," he replied through gritted teeth.

Ian did his best to look sympathetic. "Where is it that you were headed, William?" he asked.

William looked at Ian and frowned. "Scotland Yard," he said, shrugging. "It wasn't important though."

"Young man, trust me when I tell you that your meeting at Scotland Yard may change the course of history," the Doctor said. "Ian, help him. I'll clear a path. We've got to hurry."

At least we are doing something productive, Ian thought. He and William hobbled down the street with their three good legs, with the Doctor walking in front of them in large strides. "Doctor," he whispered, doing his best to be discrete, "is this why we're here? To help him solve a crime or something?"

"I don't know," the Doctor admitted. He pushed past a man begging for change and crossed the street. "We'll have to see."

He is wearing a uniform, Ian thought. *Maybe he's about to crack the Jack the Ripper case, or something.* He turned his head towards William. "Where do you work? Homicide? Robbery? Something like that?"

William stepped up onto a curb with a fair amount of difficulty. "Nothing so glamourous," he admitted.

"What then?" Ian asked "Narcotics? Vice?"

"No," William said.

Ian honestly wasn't sure how many other divisions of Scotland Yard he could name. "What then?" he asked. "Parking Enforcement?"

William gave Ian a look. "I work in *Maintenance*," he explained.

If the Doctor was surprised or upset in any way by the news that he was helping a janitor get to work on time, he didn't show it. He continued to walk down the street in broad strides, gently nudging people out of the way. They walked past the breadline a second time and gave it no more look than they had the first. The people in the streets had become a blur. The people, the poverty and the sadness brought about by economic strife – whatever it was they were here for, that wasn't it. They were here for something else, something that lay in Scotland Yard. In the Maintenance Department, as it turned out.

Scotland Yard looked much as Ian remembered it. Its stately brick towers overlooked the Thames in a way that suggested that Edward the Seventh had considered the police to be his knights of the round table. Ian had admired the

turrets many times in the past, but he had a feeling that they weren't headed towards those today. "Where's Maintenance?" he asked, expecting that he already knew the answer.

"In the basement," William said, continuing to hobble forward.

They walked through the front doors, brushing past a group of Bobbies that were heading out for a day of keeping the streets safe. The Doctor led William and Ian through the lobby. "Over there," William said, pointing towards the nearest stairwell.

The stairs gave Ian a sense of foreboding. "Doctor," he said, "I don't think that I can get him down there all by myself." The Doctor stopped. He put William's other arm around his shoulder, and they headed down the stairs carefully.

Ian, William and the Doctor found themselves in a narrow corridor with lights that flickered. Scotland Yard's basement was claustrophobic, and unpleasant. "Where to?" Ian asked.

With no arms to point with, William found this question a little more difficult to answer than normal. He stared down the hallway at a door on the right. "First door," he said. "It says 'Maintenance' on it in black letters." They walked over to the door. The Doctor grasped the handle and walked into the Maintenance Department, assuming his usual confident demeanor. Ian and William followed.

"I'm telling you," a voice said as they opened the door, "it should be yellow. Yellow is bright. Easy to spot."

"Easy to spot?" another voice said. "Why don't you make it *white* then?"

Ian helped William through the doorway. The room appeared to be used for the construction of equipment, as deemed necessary by the police. There were a number of pieces of lumber, tools, several cans of paint and a few other odds and ends. A number of sawhorses had been recently been painted red and white, and were sitting in the corner. In the centre of the room were two men, each wearing an identical uniform to the one William had on. One man was holding a brush, and the other was leaning on a ladder. In between them was a very large, familiar-looking wooden box. To be specific, a large, *unpainted* wooden box.

"*White?*" the man with the brush said. "At night, white will blend right in. It will just look dark grey, and no one will see it. I'm tellin' you *yellow* is the colour. Yellow. It implies a certain sense of caution."

"Implies a lot of things," the man leaning on the ladder objected. "I'm telling you the best colour is *red*. People will get it right away."

"People will think they're calling the fire department if you paint it red," the first man objected. "Scotland Yard will get a call every time some old lady's cat is stuck up a tree."

Ian laughed. He couldn't help himself. "He's got a point there," he said.

The man leaning on the ladder gave a shrug. "What are you doing here, anyway?" he asked.

Before Ian could speak, the Doctor answered for him. "Oh, we were just giving our friend here a hand getting to work," the Doctor said. He turned to

look at William. “Tell me young man, what colour do *you* think this box should be?”

William shrugged. If he sensed the importance of the moment, he didn’t show it. “Blue?” he suggested, turning to look at both the Doctor and then Ian.

Ian looked at the Doctor. “What do you think?” he asked. “Does *blue* sound good to you?”

The Doctor nodded in a way that suggested a man who was very satisfied with his day’s work. “Blue,” he agreed. “A sort of deep blue—”

“*Indigo*,” Ian finished for him.

The first man stared at him incredulously. “Indigo?” he sneered. “Indigo? There’s no way anyone will see *that* at night.”

The Doctor glanced at Ian for just a moment before answering. Ian thought he saw the old man wink. “Perhaps, you could put a light on it,” the Doctor suggested.

The man with the brush stared at the top of the wooden box. “What?” he asked. “At the top?”

“That’s right,” the Doctor said. “That way everyone could see it.”

Ian appeared to be doing his best to stifle a laugh. “Maybe you could put a sign on the front as well,” he said. He held his hand out, as if gesturing to a Hollywood marquee. “You know – Police Box, Public Call.”

The man leaning on the ladder nodded. “Oh, we’ve got a sign,” he said. “Don’t you worry.”

The Doctor seemed to feel that this concluded their business. He turned around abruptly and stared at William’s foot. “Your ankle is probably broken,” he said. He gave him a consoling pat on the back. “You will require medical attention.”

In another minute, Ian and the Doctor were back out on the street. It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining and the clouds were dancing in a warm summer breeze. *Has it been this warm all day?* Ian wondered. If it had been, he certainly hadn’t noticed. He’d been too wrapped up in what was going on around him. The Doctor stared up at the sky, admiring the day. Looking at his friend, Ian couldn’t help but laugh. “Let me guess,” he said, “you knew someone with a red TARDIS, and his insurance rates were terrible.”

It took the Doctor so long to answer that Ian wondered if perhaps he hadn’t heard. “As a matter a fact, I did,” the Doctor finally said. “But that’s another story.”

“So that’s it?” Ian asked. “You brought us here just to make sure that the TARDIS was *blue*?”

“The devil is in the details, my boy.” the Doctor insisted. “Besides, would *you* want to be flying around in a *yellow* TARDIS?”

“Just out of curiosity,” Ian asked, “did you do something to this Xua? Something he might want to get back at you for?”

The Doctor nodded. “Perhaps, I did,” he acknowledged. “Or perhaps I haven’t done it yet.”

Close to Home

by R.P. Fox

It was quiet as Ursula took refuge and sat in the shadowed doorway, just as several of her neighbours were doing. Others had taken to sitting on the ground beneath the floating land, talking with their companions under the protection of the shade. No one worked the land during *DualSun*-time; in fact they didn't do much at all. With both suns high, it was better to avoid the light and wait for the heat to pass.

The plants thrived on it though, and the full spectrum of their beauty revealed itself, orchestral to the eye. The plots where plants were grown within the Enclosure were said to resemble *allotments* on Earth, except these tended areas were much bigger and Earth did not have detached, floating sections of land either. So much land on Metraisos existed above the surface of the planet, each section suspended in the air like a snapshot – and within the Enclosure all land was cultivated.

Ursula's solitude was punctured by a voice coming from the edge of her family's grounds.

"Ah, hello?" Ursula looked down the thin path between patches towards the source of the unexpected greeting: a man seemed to be calling to her. He was waving and carried an assured smile. He was also shielding his eyes from the suns' brightness. Ursula stood up, not sure what to do at first. She suspected that he might not have known about *DualSun*-time, and so beckoned him towards the doorway.

"It's too light. It's not safe," she said, ushering him under the shade.

"Thank you," said the man, dabbing his neck with a dark cloth before pocketing it. "Those two suns of yours are really something, aren't they? I'm the Doctor, by the way."

"I'm Ursula."

"And what beautiful gardens you have here, Ursula," the Doctor said in admiration. Ursula asked him what a *garden* was. "Well, if it's done properly, it's a work of art. And that's what this is: a work of art." He stepped out from the doorway again and began inspecting some dangling *Vin'ma* vines in keen admiration. Amongst the many configurations of flora, the vividly purple *Vin'ma* were undoubtedly among the most striking, especially as they cascaded over the edge of several floating plots, their pointed tips lazily reaching towards the ground beneath. The Doctor gently ran his fingers against the tumbling vines. Ursula warned him again about the two suns.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm different. My eyes are getting used to it already. See?" he said, giving another flash of his smile.

"But… how?" Ursula asked, looking around for something else, further evidence of who he might be.

"Well, I'm not human, for a start."

Human. Hearing him use that word sat strangely with Ursula. It was one which had been discussed in the Learning House – that the inhabitants of the

Enclosure were descended from *humans* – but only in terms of historical understanding, an acknowledgment of the distant past; it was not something anyone referred to themselves as anymore.

"These really are quite remarkable specimens," the Doctor said. "Some are descended from various species of Earth, if I'm not mistaken." (There was another word Ursula hadn't heard before.) "This flower, here; this is from the same family line as the rose. They even share that similar, earthy smell," the Doctor continued, gesturing towards a thick patch of *kapelal*, sprouting proudly near the foot of the *Vin'ma* vines. "If you touch the stem, you can just make out where its thorns once stood, when it grew on Earth. Now they're just residual bumps, bubble-like. And the colour is different too. No plants on Earth ever grow in this colour."

Ursula was fascinated. She knew that the colours of Metraisos were very different to what her ancestors would have seen – several of which they would not have been able to perceive. The eyes of those within the Enclosure had evolved to match the planet's spectrum.

"Did you come here… by *ship*?" Ursula asked.

"I did indeed."

"But where is it?"

"Just back there. Behind those tree-things," the Doctor said, gesturing vaguely towards a thick cluster of crops. Ursula could not see anything other than plant patches from where they stood; she could never see anything but plants anyway, all the way to the surrounding walls. She was expecting something like the huge vessel the colonists had crash-landed in. Then she realized she hadn't heard a crash-landing.

"How big is your ship?"

"Not big at all," the Doctor replied. Then he thought again. "Well, at least not at first."

"Did you travel from Earth?"

"Not this time." He looked at Ursula quizzically. "Do you know of Earth, Ursula?"

"I've learned about it," she replied. "I know that's where the colonists came from. Before they – before *we* – crashed here."

Around them, figures began to move away from their places of shelter to begin tending the land once again. *DualSun*-time was beginning to pass as swiftly as it had arrived, as always.

"Humans crash-landed here?" the Doctor asked. Ursula nodded. "On Soltraisos?"

"Oh, this isn't Soltraisos. This is Metraisos," confirmed Ursula.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "You know, perhaps one day I'll be lucky and get to where I actually want to get to. Just *one* day…" Ursula found herself staring at the Doctor: his skin was so bright, almost a shade of red compared to hers with its pale blue, shimmering quality. His eyes seemed so full of colour as well, so alive. Everyone she knew all had dark eyes, closer to black than anything. But most strikingly, the Doctor had his own hair – long in a way, curled and parted either side of his face.

“Although, come to think of it, I’ve never heard of Metraisos. But I’m hazarding a guess it must be a sister planet with Soltraisos,” the Doctor considered.

“‘Soltraisos is the principle world of the Traisol System’…” Ursula echoed from her Learning House classes. “‘Of the eight worlds in the Traisol System, Soltraisos is considered the superior civilization.’”

“Well… thank you for that, Ursula,” the Doctor said after a pause. “And what about Metraisos? Where does that fit in?”

Ursula struggled to find an answer. “Metraisos is… Metraisos has…”

The Doctor smiled and gestured for Ursula not to worry. “I understand,” he said. “Metraisos is further down the pecking order. That’s the way it often is in planetary systems.” He looked around at the other figures, a number of whom were looking back at him. He appeared unnerved. Ursula then noticed what he must have seen: everybody’s face, so prominent; their shaven, pale heads and shadowy eyes set against the many and colourful flora surrounding them. “I take it you haven’t visited Soltraisos yourself?” the Doctor asked Ursula carefully. She looked at him in surprise.

“No. We don’t leave the Enclosure.”

A look of concern spread across the Doctor’s face. “And what happened to your hair?” he asked.

“It was my turn to go to the cutting area this morning,” Ursula replied.

“The… *cutting* area?”

“Yes. It’s where the Metraians take our hair. And our nails,” she said, showing him her closely cut fingernails, then pointing towards her equally short toenails. The Doctor appeared shocked. He looked out towards the others again.

“And the Metraians are the natives, I’m assuming?” he asked.

Ursula shook her head. “The Metraians and *us* are the natives.”

“I see,” he said, nodding. “And how long have you been living here?”

“I… don’t know,” she replied. She thought hard. “No one is quite sure. I was born here, if that helps. So was my mother and father, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers…” The Doctor still appeared shocked, helpless almost. Ursula felt bad for him but didn’t know what else to say. “The Metraians are good to us,” she offered. “They let us have the Enclosure. They help us. All we have to do is give them our hair.”

“And nails?”

“And nails,” Ursula nodded.

“But why do they want them?”

She thought for a moment. “I don’t know,” she said, shrugging as if not caring. At that moment, Triona, Ursula’s mother, came up between the plants towards them. Her daughter ran towards her, excited to introduce her new friend.

Later on, Ursula showed the Doctor around the Enclosure, at his request. She began by taking him to the edge of the grounds, to the high ashen walls which surrounded everything. To the Doctor, the walls seemed to stand in stony

defiance against the life they encircled. Only a single pair of unwieldy, firmly closed gates broke the continuity. The walls were clearly too high for anyone to climb, and they featured no gaps between each sectional join, revealing nothing of Metraisos beyond. Where any floating land was located at the same height as the walls, the stone perimeter simply orbited around it, rendering any chance of escape from above impossible. A gangling matrix of ladders and bridges made from dried and treated vines, interlinking the floating land sections, conveyed the lively efficiency and movement within the Enclosure; against this, the walls really did look like the edge of the world.

Eventually, Ursula and the Doctor came to the cutting area: an exposed section of dry ground with no plants and no one else currently present; all that was there were several barrel-like containers, lidless and wide.

"When is the next cutting due, Ursula?"

"Any moment," she replied. "Cutting happens all day."

"Then I think it's probably best if I stay out of the way of your hosts, for the time being," he said. "Let's just say they might not be too happy to see a stranger inside their secure compound."

Ushering Ursula towards thick crops along one edge of the empty area, the two became concealed just in time to witness a group of around forty people – males and females of all ages – being led forward by two Metraians. The Doctor observed how the Metraians hovered elegantly towards the centre of the area, moving much more gracefully than their weather-beaten, bark-like carapaces suggested. Their wings let out a low din as they lowered themselves to the ground, and their thin, angular limbs rattled as they prepared themselves. Then, from beneath their insectoid heads, a smaller limb unfolded itself; a bony proboscis with a flat, blade-like nail at the tip, which moved back and forth at speed as if in anticipation.

They watched carefully as the Metraians each swiftly positioned an individual into the middle of a barrel, and then capably cut the subject's hair and nails with noiseless, mechanical deftness. "So that's what the troughs are for," the Doctor whispered. "For collecting the hair and nails." The Metraians communicated neither to each nor to the people present; everyone involved seemed to know what was expected, therefore nothing was to be discussed.

The process took about thirty seconds per subject, each of whom just sat there, emotionless. Ursula's younger cousin, Octavia, was one of the group. She sat expressionless, closing her eyes momentarily as strands of her already short hair fell past her face into the trough. As she watched, Ursula realized that she hadn't really looked at anyone whilst they were cut before. It was something which, as an unspoken rule, you just did not do. To stare at others during the process made it feel… undignified. Ursula knew this even as a child. It could make someone feel naked, knowing they were being looked at whilst they were cut.

Within twenty minutes, the entire group were being marched away from the cutting area, all completely bald, and the Metraians dispersed to fetch others.

After the Metraians eventually left the Enclosure, returning to the world beyond the walls, Ursula and Triona gathered several households to the Learning House to meet the Doctor.

"The colony ship crash-landed many generations ago. It's understood that countless ships of its kind had left Earth, all heading for their own destinations and with no hope of returning," Triona began.

"Due to some kind of catastrophe, no doubt. Perhaps around the time of the Solar Flares?" the Doctor thought aloud. The others looked at him in silence. "Sorry. Just a guess. Please continue, Triona."

"We… have no records of why the colonists left Earth," she replied.

"Inhabitants usually leave their homeworlds due to some catastrophe or other. It's nice to think it's done in the pursuit of knowledge or the betterment of their kind, but usually it's because the planet has had enough of them. It's done in the pursuit of survival."

"We have a flower called *irsena*," said Ursula, pointing towards a specimen potted on the window ledge. "These small white pods, in the centre of the dark blue leaves, are seeds. These pods are like *irsena*'s escape vessels should anything happen to the root." The Doctor nodded in understanding. "You can hear them pop out of the flower when it happens. It's quite loud. The seed burrows its way into fertile ground so that the cycle of *irsena* can continue."

"But what happens if the seed lands on *infertile* ground?" the Doctor queried. "What happened when the colony ship landed on Metraisos?"

"Metraisos' atmosphere appeared similar enough to Earth," replied Triona. "But because of what became known as *DualSun*-time, the humans knew it would be hard to adapt. Salvaged supplies didn't last long, and they became desperate. The sunlights caused rapid cancers in some of the weaker, more vulnerable colonists."

"So how did they survive?"

"The Metraians found them. They saw the humans were harmless, especially given how desperate they were. They separated some from the group and experimented on them. When they brought the ones back whom they had taken away, they had been all but scalped, and their fingernails and toenails had been bloodily extracted. But the Metraians had discovered some kind of value in the humans. When they first tried to extract the hair and nails it was a very crude, very… *greedy* process. There were injuries. The humans fought back rather than be maimed, naturally. But eventually they realized it was something they could actually *offer* to their hosts, so they formed an agreement."

"Keratin," said the Doctor. "It's your keratin they want, isn't it?" Triona nodded. "So, let me guess. A deal was offered, whereby the humans would allow the Metraians to harvest keratin at the reward of being allowed to live in the Enclosure? I presume the Metraians must have helped the humans construct this place as well."

"The humans also showed them how they cut their own hair and nails. Thankfully, the Metraians soon adapted their extraction methods. They even grew a special limb for the process."

"Yes, I noticed a very specific claw-blade," said the Doctor. "A chilling-

looking appendage, it must be said." He asked everyone in the Learning House how they felt about the cutting area, and about life within the Enclosure. For the most part, everyone simply agreed that it was just how things were; that it was an acceptable and harmless way for them to survive. But Octavia saw it differently.

"I don't like having my hair taken away," she said, shaking her head and glancing over at the Doctor. He became aware of his own longer hair and self-consciously ran his hand through it.

"I'm sorry, my dear. We cannot grow our hair. You understand, don't you?" Octavia's mother said softly.

"But, *why?"* Octavia said again, on the verge of tears.

"So, when the keratin is removed, it's of great worth to the Metraians," the Doctor postulated.

"It is," agreed Lan, Octavia's father. "I have communicated with them, and they have given us a little information."

"It's nice to know they're not complete monsters, at least. Not leaving you totally in the dark," said the Doctor, incredulously.

"Oh, they are not monsters," continued Lan, shaking his head in disagreement. Others murmured in his support. "They have allowed us to have the Enclosure."

"And it is a good life, a life worth living," spoke another individual, defensively.

The Doctor sensed he was being perceived as speaking out of turn. "Of course. Please go on."

"Our keratin is akin to an incredibly rare mineral which exists in only very small amounts," continued Lan. "It is extremely versatile, but is particularly useful as an efficient source of interplanetary fuel. A very small amount could do the job of thousands of times the equivalent of a lesser fuel."

"But there is more to it than selling refined fuel," added Triona. "We feel that the Metraians have achieved some kind of respectability due to the product."

"*Some* feel that, Triona," said Lan, folding his arms.

"Metraisos didn't carry the same status as Soltraisos or other worlds in the system. They had nothing to offer, no minerals or technology. They were seen as savages," Triona continued.

"And the keratin gave them the attention they always wanted," said the Doctor.

"Our hosts – the Metraians – saved us, Doctor," said Lan. "They came to the rescue of an alien race who had crash-landed on their world. They had no obligation to show such compassion. They deserve respect."

"Then why don't they respect us enough to open those gates?" asked Triona, meeting Lan's defiant stare.

"We have a good life here," snapped Lan.

"We have a *life* here. That's it," Triona responded.

"And some of us know how to appreciate it more than others, just as it's always been," Lan said, archly. Those alongside him murmured in agreement;

nobody seemed to stand with Triona. She shook her head, looking away.

Unlike the unremitting light of *DualSun*-time, night on Metraisos was peaceful and thickly dark. After eating at the family home, Ursula and Triona took the Doctor for a walk around their plots. The Doctor observed that there was no moon, therefore nothing to cast light over the Enclosure. However, several plant species were phosphorescent, so most gardens had rows of such plants laid along borders, illuminating the walkways, ladders and bridges at night. Some families had even nurtured them to grow over and along outer walls so that their homes stood alight with colour.

The Doctor commented on how the illumination from the plants was just as beautiful as by day, and how the purple radiance of the *Vin'ma* hanging against the black of the floating land resembled an unmoving waterfall. He then described what a waterfall was, seeing as how the only water supply they had within the Enclosure was the central, purpose-built lake.

"You should see the waterfalls of Soltraisos," the Doctor said in admiration. "That's what I was heading there for. Can't beat a good waterfall."

Ursula asked the Doctor more about Earth.

"Oh, Earth's great," he said. "They've got icebergs and mountains. And hills. And lots of different teas," he added. "And they do these little cakes with butter and jam spread on top. Which are even better if it's raining and you've just sat down in front of a warm fire."

"As a child," Triona began, shaking her head, "I would find myself looking out towards the stars at night, wondering how far away our other home – our *original* home – actually is. Silly really, I know."

"We've all done that, Triona," the Doctor responded warmly. "Even if you've got a good idea which one it is up there, we're all drawn to seeking it out, putting it in perspective with all the other points of light." His words made Ursula and Triona yearn, as if they were nostalgic for something they had never even known.

The following morning, the Doctor gathered the households together again. He declared that he intended to find out what was happening to the harvested keratin. "I have a ship, and it can help us find out what's happening beyond the Enclosure. It's a finding-things-out ship. Sometimes, at least." He shrugged. "But, I'll be needing some help… so, I'd like volunteers to come with me. What do you say?"

He looked around at everyone; they all appeared shocked. A sense of trepidation crept through Ursula, and although there was something in the Doctor's intentions that she felt she could trust – something about him that meant well towards them all – she sensed that everything was about to change.

"Doctor, are you asking someone to… leave the Enclosure with you?" asked Triona.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. But I'll return you back safely, I

promise."

"And what about the Metraians?" asked Lan.

"Oh, they don't have to know. We'll be gone and back before you know it. I'm very discrete. In fact I'm known for it." The group remained silent as the Doctor looked between them.

"We will go with you," said Triona eventually, holding Ursula's hand tightly. Ursula looked up at her, shocked but full of excitement. The Doctor grinned at them both.

"Okay. Good. That's very good," said the Doctor.

"Triona, what are you doing?" asked Lan. "We don't know this man. The Metraians—"

"As the Doctor said," interjected Triona, "the Metraians don't have to know."

"You are jeopardizing our safety, Triona. You will be jeopardizing our lives."

"Lan," said the Doctor, approaching him, "I am trying to help. Can't you trust just one more alien who's trying to help a stranded people?" Lan stared at the Doctor, then at Triona. She and Ursula looked back at him, and no one else in the room spoke. Lan turned and left the Learning House, with Octavia in tow. She turned and looked at Ursula, who smiled and waved, not knowing whether she was saying goodbye or not.

Waiting until they knew no Metraians were in the Enclosure, the Doctor eventually led them to his ship. When they arrived, Ursula couldn't quite understand what it was at first: outside it was just a grey-blue box, not a ship at all – yet, once inside, it was still not a ship. There were controls, as she had expected, and flashing lights. But there was also an old chair, stacks of books, a discarded leather coat and a deep brownish-green felt jacket, and a few abandoned mechanical items.

It wasn't a ship, she knew that. It was too untidy. It was the Doctor's life, or so it seemed to her.

"The TARDIS is a doorway to, well, pretty much everything," the Doctor said. He seemed concerned by their quietness. "So… do you like it? I mean if it's a bit too much for you, I understand. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, of course. The Enclosure's just back through the doorway behind you. No pressure."

"I do… *like* it," Ursula said, nodding. Triona kept quiet and just looked around.

"It's not quite as bright and beautiful as your home, of course," said the Doctor, looking about. "In fact it's, well, it's a little bit gloomy now I come to think about it…"

"It's marvelous," Ursula offered, politely.

"A touch on the Gothic side, even. Perhaps it could do with a few plants about the place. Or just a bit more light… maybe some halogens…"

"It's fine as it is. It's your home. *Your* enclosure," Ursula said.

The Doctor looked at her. "My… *enclosure*?" he repeated, intrigued.

"This is where you live, isn't it?" she continued. The Doctor looked around, then down at the control panels. The TARDIS was making a sort of sighing sound, like it was old and tired of everything. Ursula liked that sound.

"I suppose it is, yes," he said, nodding carefully. "But I wouldn't say my *enclosure*. More my…"

"Your what?" Triona asked.

"Well, see, now you've got me. I can't say my *home from home* because that doesn't quite cover it."

"What's a 'home from home'?" asked Ursula, looking up at her mother. Triona just shrugged.

The Doctor paused, stuck for words. Then the controls made a thudding sound which Ursula also liked. "Ah. Here we are," the Doctor said, quickly activating the door controls with a look of relief.

"Where?" Triona asked.

"Soltraisos," he replied. "If anybody around here needs to buy up fuel for interplanetary travel, then 'the principle world of the Traisol System' is as likely guess as any. Come on. Let's introduce ourselves to the neighbours."

Soltraisos was not like anything Ursula or Triona had seen before.

It was streets and buildings, noise and freedom. Each Soltraian moved around wherever they wished – and there was so many of them – in their shimmering golden and white plating, which at first Ursula took to be their clothing but then realized it to be a kind of armour, like the shells of the Metraians but not as brutal. Wide wings allowed the Soltraians to hover and effortlessly scale the highest of buildings, alighting onto different platforms like insects investigating some grander species of flower.

The pair followed the Doctor through the busy streets.

"What are we going to do now, Doctor?" asked Triona.

"My usual trick: just find the first figure of authority I come to, then work my way up from there," he replied.

The Doctor introduced Ursula and Triona to virtually every Soltraian they met. The initial reactions they received were mixtures of confusion or surprise – but they quickly gained the attention the Doctor sought, and they were soon addressed by two evidently armed, but polite, guards. The guards ushered the Doctor, Ursula and Triona onto a lightweight raft of some kind, which the guards then gripped one side each; suddenly yet effortlessly, they pulled it upwards towards the pinnacle of a high, slender glass building. Ursula gripped her mother's waist tightly, closing her eyes as the ground was pulled away from them at abundant speed. Triona gasped and looked at the Doctor, who offered her a reassuring smile, which did little to help. Mother and daughter held their breath for the entire short and terrifying journey.

Once at the top of the building, the travelers were ushered into an imposing, vaulted chamber. After a time, a dozen important-looking Soltraians calmly walked into the chamber and sat across a long table, facing the three of them.

The Soltraians did not wear the armour of their guards or many of those on the thoroughfares below, but instead wore long, ethereal gowns.

The Soltraians said nothing at first, as if detachedly awaiting the strangers to begin. The Doctor explained why he had brought Ursula and Triona from Metraisos, and demanded to know why Soltraisos had allowed the people of the Enclosure to remain there. The Soltraians looked at each other.

"What concern is it to the Southern Soltraian Council about what happens on Metraisos, Doctor?" asked the chief councilor, a tall woman with a deep, resonant voice. "Are they mistreated?"

"Well, not as such," the Doctor replied. "Other than being kept against their will."

"But their situation is beneficial to both species, is it not?" asked another.

"The people of the Enclosure have thrived for centuries under their arrangement with the Metraians," added the chief councilor.

"Thrived? They are not thriving," said the Doctor in agitation. He turned and gently ushered Triona and Ursula forward. "They are alive, but with no freedoms other than to keep on living. To keep providing keratin for the Metraians."

Triona and Ursula looked at the twelve Soltraians in silence. They felt vulnerable in their presence; the Soltraians gave nothing away in their expressions.

After a moment, another Soltraian spoke, as if suddenly remembering something: "Ah. Are you referring to the substance – the keratin as you call it – to create the fuel which Metraisos produces?"

"Yes," said the Doctor. "What else do you think I meant?"

"We used to import the keratin from Metraisos, but no longer."

"What? Then who's buying it?"

"Lesser worlds, perhaps," suggested another councilor. "Ones in the outer reaches of the system."

"But surely you would know if another planet in your system was attempting interplanetary travel," said the Doctor. "I'd imagine you monitor that sort of thing in, as you say, *lesser* worlds than your own?" The councilor gently coughed in response.

The chief councilor shifted uncomfortably. She glanced at those sitting either side of her. "There could be one possibility…" she began. "The South has previously bought… *modest* amounts of keratin from Metraisos," she admitted eventually. "But… some in the Northern Soltraian Provinces may still be buying it."

"And why is that?" the Doctor asked.

The councilors looked between each other. "We… do not have diplomatic relations with the North," said the chief councilor.

"Fine," said the Doctor, swiftly.

"What do you mean, *fine*?" the chief councilor responded.

"As in, 'fine, I don't care,'" the Doctor shrugged. "Plenty of worlds are divided into states and factions and territories, all hostile to one other. Everywhere has got its own Cold War going on at some time or other."

"'Cold… War'?" asked another councilor.

The Doctor waved dismissively. "Never mind about that. So, you think the North are still buying up the keratin and turning it into fuel?"

"Not fuel," said the chief councilor. "Unfortunately, it seems the keratin can also be turned into something else."

"I'm guessing this 'something else' isn't a dessert topping," said the Doctor, mostly to himself.

"Decades ago," began the chief councilor, "the North went through a crisis. The majority of the younger populace became addicted to a narcotic called *oscita*; a substance which doesn't naturally grow on any other world, and only in North Soltraisos due to its position with the suns. The addiction became epidemic for some time before it was finally controlled, the last vestiges of the substance eventually being contained and disposed of by North Soltraian authorities."

"Did *oscita* makes its way south, ever?" asked the Doctor.

"No," the chief councilor said firmly. "It was contained within the North. Thankfully."

"Good for you," the Doctor laughed in disgust. "And I presume the Southern Soltraian Territories had something to do with preventing it spreading south? Some kind of clandestine *aid mission*? All done in the name of helping the poor wretches of the North, of course."

"Doctor, tensions and divisions between states are tragic, of course," began the chief councilor, "but there are always good reasons. Often ones which reach back before living memory. We in the South had no intention of allowing ourselves to fall as the North allowed itself to."

"Yes, very good." The Doctor nodded. He had begun pacing impatiently back and forth. "Self-sufficiency. Superiority over the lesser state. So, what is the North doing with the keratin if not using it… for…" He paused, a look of horror spreading across his face. "The keratin couldn't be used for… could it?"

"It is… a possibility," said the chief councilor, gravely.

"A substitute for *oscita*?"

Triona and Ursula looked at each other, at their shaven heads, their clothes. They thought of life within the Enclosure: their homes, the flora, the solace of shade during *DualSun*-time. Ursula recalled when she was a little girl, how she and Octavia and other cousins would run and skilfully scale the ladders to the tops of the floating land, whilst others scrambled up *Vin'ma* vines, much to the consternation of the adults at work. She remembered how she used to lie down on the softer flowerbeds and look upwards at the clear skies, towards the enclosing night, looking for points of light and guessing which world might have been her ancestors', just as her mother had done.

"Doctor?" she began.

"Yes, Ursula?"

"Will we see the waterfalls? The Soltraian waterfalls you talked about?" Triona looked down at her daughter, then back at the Doctor.

"Ah, Soltraian waterfalls," the Doctor said gently. "They are something to behold, aren't they?" He turned to the councilors, searching for agreement. They

smiled at Ursula after some effort, nodding warmly. “I’m sure we will visit them, Ursula. But later. First, there is work to do.” He looked towards the councilors again. “People like you don’t like getting your hands dirty, I know,” the Doctor said to them. “But you must see that the North needs your help? And what of Ursula and Triona here? Should I just take them back to their Enclosure, with the full knowledge of what their sacrifices are being used for?”

“Doctor, we cannot simply interfere in the affairs of the North. We—”

“Oh, I’m sure they would be grateful for the help, councilor. You’d be surprised how many people out there can be grateful for help they didn’t even know was coming. And besides, we don’t have to do much else but kill the problem at the root.”

“Why are things like this always spread over such long distances?” the Doctor said in exasperation, jabbing at the TARDIS controls as they raced towards the Northern Soltraian Provinces.

Ursula and Triona held on tightly to each other as the TARDIS veered sideways on its flight path. The two Soltraian ambassadors – whom the Doctor had insisted come with them – also held on tightly to whatever they could, silently exchanging concerned glances. Ursula didn’t find it concerning, though. She found it exciting. But she did wonder if the Doctor had only recently started using his ship.

“That’s the trouble with interplanetary crime: it involves so much mileage getting to the bottom of it all,” he continued, mostly to himself.

The Northern Soltraian Provinces looked as if they could have once been like Southern Soltraian Territories, but that everything had stopped, like a fertile crop cut too early in its growth. Unlike the near-regal uniformity of the South – or even the strange, peaceful order of the Enclosure – the North was in crisis. It had indeed been ravaged by another drug epidemic, and its society might not have been far from collapse. Triona held Ursula tightly as the Doctor and the ambassadors walked the streets, trying to get a better understanding of what was happening. Buildings were left neglected, some burnt out and near to collapsing; Northdwellers were fighting in the streets, with the authorities seemingly unable to control the spiraling of events.

One of the ambassadors approached an older Northdweller, who eyed him with mistrust rather than respect, crouching slightly as if in fear for his safety. The Northdweller, like many of those around him, wore no armour and seemingly had no ability to fly. His clothes were shabby, and his thin body appeared bent and delicate. The ambassador asked him what had happened.

“The North fell again, that’s what happened,” he replied. “But what do *you* care?” he asked, jabbing his walking stick accusatively at the group. The ambassadors looked helplessly at each other.

“You say the North has fallen again? What caused it this time?” the Doctor asked.

The Northdweller looked at the Doctor with fleeting interest, before reverting back to a cynical expression. “They say it’s something to do with Metraisos,” he said. “Something that the *oscita* cartels are importing from there. Something new.” Ursula and Triona shifted, attempting to conceal themselves behind the tall ambassadors. “I’ve heard that it’s something to do with the humans on Metraisos. Can you believe that? *What* humans on Metraisos? Ridiculous.” The Northdweller released a croaky laugh, as if he hadn’t had good reason to laugh in a long time.

The Doctor turned to Ursula and Triona, ushering them forward.

The Northdweller stopped laughing and stared at their shaven heads, their short nails, their… *human* faces. He shook his head. “No. It can’t be true.” He looked between the ambassadors and back at Ursula and Triona. “Who are you? What is this?”

“We’re going to fix this,” the Doctor said. “We’re going to give you back the North. I can promise you.” The ambassadors shifted awkwardly, startled by the Doctor’s words.

The old Northdweller seemed briefly overcome, then he turned and slowly wandered along the street without another word, as if suddenly believing what he had just witnessed was not real. The Doctor moved towards the old figure, but then hesitated. Either side of the slowly moving figure, buildings continued to crumble, the North continued to collapse.

“So, now we’ve got a better understanding, correct?” the Doctor said accusatively, turning to the ambassadors. “Now you see what’s going on with the keratin? The keratin Metraisos has been selling to the Northern cartels whilst you have been in purposeful ignorance.”

“Doctor, the Northern Soltraian Provinces are an independent state. They must deal with such crimes in the manner of their choosing. How could we know that—”

“We seem to be coming across a lot of gaps in everyone’s knowledge today, don’t we?” the Doctor interrupted dismissively. “How convenient. Ignorance must make the miles, the light years, the *aeons* seem so much more comfortable to societies like the Southern Soltraian Territories.” He paced along the road in agitation, watched by the others. “Right, well I would like to know one thing. That is, as long as you actually know the answer to it.”

“Yes?” asked one of the ambassadors cautiously.

“How much of an army can you spare?”

The vibration of the Soltraian vessel felt almost unbearable as it came in to land. Ursula stared through the bridge window at the outside of the high Enclosure walls. From this perspective, they were just a flat gray mass stretching along her field of vision, nondescript yet menacing. Metraisos outside of the Enclosure was fertile, but uninhabited and wild; nothing like the cultivated beauty of the tended plots she knew so well.

The Doctor led the way out of the vessel’s main cargo doors with Ursula and Triona in tow, followed by a platoon of Southern Soltraian soldiers. Even

more soldiers marched out after them, their golden armour glinting sharply in the daylight.

Once outside the Enclosure gates, the soldiers stood in imperial silence. Ursula held Triona's hand tightly. The Doctor stood tall, resembling a warrior in his own way, Ursula thought. He turned to her and winked, and she felt instantly safer. Then the Doctor gave the signal, and the Soltraians marched towards the gates. As large and as heavy as the gates were, they opened swiftly – their hinges groaning, then screeching – under the pressure of the metal pry bars the soldiers wielded. After a few moments, the gates had been pulled fully wide and the Enclosure was exposed.

Ursula's people awaited them inside, having gathered near the gates as they opened. The people looked so small, their clothes so old and colourless. Their plots of land looked so well-kept and full of colour and life – yet also fragile, as if they could have been taken away at any given moment.

Suddenly, from beyond the Soltraian ships, a convoy of Metraians hurriedly flew towards the gates. Being a smaller, less fearful race than the Southern Soltraians – not least due to the lack of advanced armour – the Metraians looked desperate, angry and outnumbered. The Soltraian commander stepped forward.

"We are here to set the People of Earth free," she said in a booming voice from within her armour. *People of Earth?* It did not register at first to the inhabitants of the Enclosure that she was referring to them. Ursula looked at the Doctor. He realized their concern and spoke next.

"Everyone, please. The Soltraian commander refers to you all. To the Soltraians, you have always been the People of Earth." The inhabitants looked at each other. Neither the Metraians nor any of them had given themselves a collective *name*, ever; yet they didn't see themselves as *humans* anymore either. They could name dozens upon dozens of flora that grew in their gardens, hundreds even; they could explain everything there is to know about the *Vin'ma*, and why it thrives on the exposure of *DualSun*-time; about the *irsena* and its astonishing gift for survival; about the *kapelal*, that tiny flower with its lengthy roots leading all the way back to Earth's *rose*. But if you were to ask them what they were, what there was to say about themselves…

Ursula felt hands on her shoulders. It was her mother; her eyes were beginning to well up, a look of encroaching happiness on her face.

"What is the meaning of this?" screamed the Principle Metraian. It darted aggressively between the Soltraian commander – who did not move an inch – and the Doctor, who appeared equally as composed. "You have no right to be here," the Metraian continued at volume. "These creatures are our property." This was also the first time any of the inhabitants had heard themselves referred to as property. Ursula and Triona shared the wave of resentment that moved through everyone within the Enclosure.

"You have been treating them as your own property, that's true," the Doctor began.

"These creatures have been *allowed* to live here. They have a satisfactory existence. It's simply their side of a mutually beneficial arrangement, and it has worked well for centuries," said the Metraian, buzzing violently back and forth

in front of the Doctor, who seemed to be studying its agitation carefully.

"Oh, indeed. These humans have had, as you put it, an *existence*," the Doctor said. "But what is existence if not just a base form of living?"

"They have these grounds to call their own. They are looked after. They go without very little—"

"And what do you get in return? What exactly does Metraisos gain from extracting the human keratin?" The Metraian remained quiet, then glanced towards the Enclosure. "I'll tell you," the Doctor continued. "You get wealthy, that's what."

"It has come to our attention," began the Soltraian commander once more to everyone in the Enclosure, "that Metraisos, as well as trading with a source of sustainable fuel, has also been secretly providing a consistent supply of a narcotic substance to our neighbours in the Northern Soltraian Provinces." The people in the Enclosure appeared shocked, gasping at what they were hearing. Lan stepped forward, a look of betrayal on his face. "The North suffered many decades of addiction to the substance called *oscita* before it was controlled and finally obliterated by the authorities. Now it has returned in the form of rendered human keratin. Therefore, we are here to ensure that Metraisos halts the harvesting of human keratin, with immediate effect."

"No, no, NO!" screamed the Principle Metraian. "What business is it of yours? We have a *deal* with these creatures."

The Soltraian commander stood poised, dwarfing the Principle Metraian. Ursula thought for a moment that the Metraian was going to be killed. "As of immediate effect, the humans are free to leave the Enclosure—"

"NO!" screamed the frantic Metraian.

"—and to leave Metraisos. The humans are hereby invited to be taken to the safety of the Southern Soltraian Territories, where they will be allowed to decide their future movements from there."

The Soltraian troops all stood aside, leaving the way clear to the cargo platforms. The Principle Metraian remained agitated, flitting between the platforms, then back to the Soltraian commander, then the Doctor, who ignored him and turned his attention to everyone standing at the gates.

"You're free to leave," he began gently. "You owe nothing more to this planet. You can finally continue your journey." The inhabitants all just stood there. "The Southern Soltraian Territories don't have to be your final destination," the Doctor added. "It's only that, from there, you will be helped to decide what you want to do."

The inhabitants looked at the man who had come and defended them; this small group of people, living on an alien world countless light years from their home and their history, and with no foreseeable future of any kind.

Yet he came and defended them anyway. How were they supposed to respond?

For some, the arrival of the Doctor had made them feel something they hadn't felt in generations: like prisoners. As preparations began to take the inhabitants of the Enclosure away from Metraisos, infighting arose within their numbers. Some said that they didn't want to feel like prisoners, but the Doctor

had made them feel that way. There were those – like Lan – who believed that life within the Enclosure had been good in a way, but now he realized the truth of their imprisonment, and the pain it had brought to others so far away. Lan believed that they were now being rightfully liberated. Ursula watched as Octavia grasped the Doctor and hugged him, crying, whilst he tried to reassure her that they would be better off, and guided her and her father towards a Soltraian ship.

But there were also those that now believed that, ultimately, Metraisos was their home; that it was their culture, their everything. And that in every way, they somehow *belonged* there. To the Doctor's surprise, Triona was the first to voice this. Others sided with her, and came and stood with her and Ursula.

They stood by as many more left the Enclosure. Whole families took anything of value they owned: pieces of home-made furniture; musical instruments hand-carved from wood and clay; a book someone had written which had been used in one of the Learning Houses; and many different types of flora, carefully potted and ready for travel. They all made their way onto the Soltraian vessels, and once the doors closed, the Doctor and the remaining people watched intently as the ships lifted off the surface of Metraisos and vanished into the sunlit skies, their vibration and disruption instantly transforming into a recent memory of itself.

The gates of the Enclosure stood wide open, and the Metraians idly shifted away. They no longer had any use for the Enclosure, and their interest in the inhabitants disappeared with it.

The Doctor accompanied Ursula and Triona back to their home. The remaining families came with them as well. It surprised Ursula how many of them decided to not leave for Soltraisos, but it felt reassuring also.

"I can't convince you that leaving Metraisos would be the better idea," the Doctor said, "but at least you have made the decision for yourselves." He turned to Ursula. "And anyway, those Soltraian waterfalls aren't going anywhere."

There was a great deal more land within the Enclosure for those who remained to use – as well as whatever was beyond it, now the gates were left open. For the time being at least, the humans decided it would be best to stay close to home.

Years later, Ursula found herself tending the ground where the TARDIS once stood. There were tall flowers standing there, grey-blue ones. Ursula and Triona were one of four families remaining within what was the Enclosure by that time – although everyone had stopped calling it that long before. They stopped calling it anything at all. But Ursula had never forgotten the Doctor, and she could not deny she would have liked to have seen other worlds; to have seen the universe as he saw it, tending to one adventure after another. But she was grateful to the Doctor for giving them the adventure he had, right on their own doorstep. Right here, he took them from the darkness of the unknown and into

the light of the known – the light of what it is to call something *home*.

Perhaps I'll walk beyond the gates one day, Ursula thought to herself on occasion, *and maybe I won't come back. Perhaps I'll go off on my own adventure, find out where the others have gone. But not just yet.* Ursula was happy, being here with Triona, tending to the garden. She was the only one her mother could depend on in her old age. And anyway, Triona liked Ursula being there. She liked it when she brushed her hair.

Straight on Till Morning

by Chris Heffernan

The sound of swordplay echoed along the metal corridors. The pirates' diminutive foes fell before the brutal attack. They fought well for half-men, but they did not have the training or experience of the buccaneers. Dozens of the small guards lay lifeless behind them, and now only a closed metal portal stood between them and their final victory!

Short work was made of the lock, and the portal slid open to reveal a tiny room flooded with a dull, orange light. Within stood two more of the tiny guards. Standing behind them, shakily holding a red ribbon in his hand and babbling to himself, stood the Straw Man. The lead pirate grinned menacingly and stepped forward. The two short guards tried their best to stop him, but his companions were quicker and ran them through. Stepping over their small forms, the lead pirate stood face to face with the final enemy.

"The Captain sends his regards." The pirate smirked.

The Straw Man did not reply, but simply frowned as the pirate's cutlass lopped his head off. Bits of straw and cloth fluttered to the floor.

The pirate turned to his comrades and raised his cutlass high into the air.

"Victory!" he shouted.

"Victory!" they replied.

Follow the Yellow Brick Road! Fly to Neverland! Wiggle through the Rabbit Hole, or wind your way down the Way-Out Tunnel!

Visit AmazingWorld! today and experience the wonders of your favourite childhood stories from within the story itself!

AmazingWorld!, located on Kalliope Minor, just a hop, skip and a light-year jump from the Pranultic Space Junction, offers sixteen state-of-the-art animatronic theme zones from stories such as Peter Pan, the Wizard of Oz, and Groofus the Moofus!

Mel lowered the brochure and cocked her head at the Doctor.

"Groofus the Moofus?" she asked.

The Doctor looked up from the control console of the TARDIS, where he was trying desperately to remove a small stain with a handkerchief.

"Hmm?" he asked, frowning. Then a silly smile appeared on his face. "Oh yes, good old Groofus. *Groofus the Moofus and the Way-Out Tunnel*. He was a Meeliopod. Very popular in the Lucian Sector. Of course, he was a few thousand years after your time. A classic!"

Mel frowned a little and returned to the brochure:

Bring the whole family to the greatest theme park extravaganza of all time! Don't forget to book at least six cycles in advance as space is limited and reservations are flying in. See you at AmazingWorld!

"Can we go, Doctor?" Mel asked. "It sounds fascinating. The animatronic programming alone would be off the charts!"

The Doctor gave up on the stain and looked up at Mel.

"Why not?" he said. "I've always wanted to travel down the Way-Out Tunnel!"

Mel grinned and moved to stand beside him at the console.

The Doctor entered the coordinates, and the TARDIS began its short journey. Within moments they had arrived on Kalliope Minor, just over two years after AmazingWorld!'s opening day, to avoid the crowds. Upon opening the ship's doors, they saw that they had landed in the back of a control room.

The room was completely deserted, and it appeared it had been deserted for some time.

"Of course," Mel said under her breath.

Frowning, the Doctor stepped into the control room, placed his hat and umbrella on a table, and immediately began to push buttons and flick switches at a dusty computer.

Mel looked around the room. The only light came in through windows covered in dirt and grime. Computer banks lay dormant underneath plastic dust covers. Mel moved to a deserted workstation and lifted a security pass off the table. She blew ages of dust off the card.

"'Martin Strenel, Park Security,'" she read. "Doctor, what happened here?"

"That," the Doctor said, taking a small rectangular device from a pocket inside his cream-coloured jacket and plugging it into the computer he was working at, "is what we are about to find out."

The computer screen popped and fizzed and came to life. Mel moved beside the Doctor, and the white-green light from the screen lit up their faces. On the screen, a man in a bright red suit that looked like it was made of vinyl stood in front of a wardrobe in an old, empty, wooden-panelled room. He was addressing the camera:

"…was once touted as being the greatest amusement park of its type… indeed perhaps the greatest theme park of all time. AmazingWorld! A place where one can" – the man looked back at the wardrobe – "*step through the wardrobe into magical places from their favourite childhood fantasies."*

Mel looked at the Doctor. "I discovered a series of archival news items. This was the last saved in AmazingWorld!'s files," he explained.

The man on the screen continued:

"But problems with AmazingWorld!'s state-of-the-art animatronics would mean the park would never open. Problems serious enough that Kalliope Major State Minister Stimm Vrontel stated, 'We simply cannot, in good faith, open the park to the public in its current state.' AmazingWorld! Inc., once the fastest rising corporation in the Empire, was losing shareholders and advertisers in droves. Within a few shorts weeks of its planned opening day, AmazingWorld!'s doors… and wardrobes… were closed for good.

"But what was this serious problem with the animatronics? Why could it not be fixed? Millions of credits down the rabbit hole and to this day, the real story is still buried. Today would be the one-year anniversary of AmazingWorld!'s grand opening, yet Kalliope Minor is still off limits to travellers.

"Will we ever discover the truth of what happened to AmazingWorld!? Perhaps, but until then, 'That world is ended, as if it had never been.'"

The picture faded out and was replaced with a date. The Doctor looked at his watch.

"That news special was just over one year ago," he said. "Relative time."

"But what happened, Doctor?" Mel asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I'd only heard of AmazingWorld! in passing. As far as I knew, it was fully operational. Interesting."

The Doctor patted his hat onto his head, picked up his umbrella and smiled at Mel.

"Shall we?" he said, offering her his arm.

"Investigate?" she asked, smiling back.

"Investigate!"

They followed signs posted on the walls through the endless, identical corridors until they found an exit. This hatch brought them out into a forested area that had overgrown with neglect, making their exit more difficult than it ought to have been. Mel was thankful that she had put her usually unruly red hair into a bun and was practical in her choice of simple white top, green tights and flats.

They struggled through the thick foliage for a few minutes before the trees and bushes and weeds finally started to thin out a little. The Doctor stopped to examine a metal signpost half hidden in the brush. It was almost rusted over to the point of illegibility. The Doctor brushed at the metal plate which read "Operations Access Hatch 23 – Authorized Personnel Only."

"Oh Doctor, look," Mel said.

The Doctor looked up and saw Mel standing a few feet away, looking through some old, dead apple trees. He moved to stand beside her and looked down at what she was looking at. It was cracked, and had grass and weeds growing throughout it, but it was definitely a yellow brick road.

"We're in Oz," Mel said.

"So we are." He smiled. "I believe we should follow the yellow brick road."

And so they did. It wound its way through the forest, sometimes damaged quite badly, other times still in quite good condition. Eventually the path divided into a Y-intersection. A wooden signpost stood at the heart of the junction. The sign pointing back from the way they came read "Emerald City." To the left read "Narnia." Two sign arrows pointed to the right. One read "Neverland," and the other "Meelio Town."

"Ah, Meelio Town!" the Doctor exclaimed like a little child. "Home of Groofus the Moofus!"

He started out along the right-hand path, his umbrella spinning in his hand. Mel smiled and ran after him.

What they had failed to notice was the security camera hidden amongst the branches of the trees. This in itself was nothing unexpected; there were thousands of security cameras throughout the park, as would be expected. However, this camera actively followed their movement.

Mr. Smee marched down the steps and stopped at the door. He knocked once and then entered. The room beyond was opulent, filled with various treasures from the numerous worlds they had conquered: a black-pointed hat, a lion's head, fuzzle-wuzzle gems, a vase of poppies, and lots of gold and gold-plated thingamajigs.

Smee stopped before a large ornate desk. The comfy chair on the other side of the desk had its back to Smee, and its occupant was staring at a map that was pinned to the wall. It was a map of AmazingWorld! The area on the eastern edge of the theme park was labelled "Neverland." All the other areas had their names crossed out with a skull and crossbones and had the word "Neverland" scrawled above them.

"Yes, what is it, Smee?" the occupant said, his deep voice resonating off the walls. The particular pitch of that voice, combined with the acoustics of the room, always set Smee's nose on end.

"There's something you should see, Captain," Smee said.

"Really, Smee? I'm quite busy."

"Oh I think you definitely want to see this, Captain, sir," Smee said, squinting a little and wiggling the tip of his nose with his finger.

"Oh, very well," the Captain said.

Smee lead the Captain to a lower deck and into what was once the cargo hold of the great ship. Computer banks and information terminals and security screens were patched together haphazardly. A few pirates were gathered around a particular screen. Smee pushed his way to the front of the group.

"At attention, boys!" he said. "Captain coming through!"

The pirates stood back and saluted as the Captain walked past. Mr. Smee pointed to the screen, a little smirk on his face. The Captain huffed in boredom and pulled spectacles from within his overcoat. He placed them on the bridge of his nose, wiggling his curled, black mustaches as he did so, and peered down at the monitor.

On the screen, a pair of figures were walking along that bright road in Oz. The Captain was shocked at the vision since he was certain they had vanquished all enemies. A brief flare of excitement rose in his chest as he realized he had new foes to destroy. He looked at the small man with the funny hat and strange sword, but it was when his eyes fell on the man's companion that his chest almost exploded with shock.

"Peter Pan!" Captain James Hook shouted.

The yellow brick road grew narrower and narrower as they moved further away from the heart of Oz. The forest was still all around them, but soon a dirt path had completely replaced the road. The path veered off to the right with a small sign post whose placard had cracked in half long ago. The remaining letters on the sign read "…io Town."

A sign pointing to the left read "Neverland."

Humming to himself, the Doctor followed the path to the right. Mel was skipping along behind him. The forest soon thinned out, and Mel couldn't help but stare around in awe at the suddenly alien landscape before her. Everything was hard edges and shining, as if the entire world was made of metal. Even the sky had suddenly changed, going from what she would consider normal sunlight, to a sort of bluish, wavy light. She of course had never heard of *Groofus the Moofus and the Way-Out Tunnel*, but was now keen to read it.

After walking for a few minutes along the now shiny, smooth path, Mel could see what appeared to be a large blue building far off in the distance. She was about to ask the Doctor if that was Meelio Town, when the ground off to their left suddenly began to open up. A head appeared through the opening. It wore a crooked old tricorne, and the face beneath the hat was weather-beaten and mean-looking. As the head came further out of the hole, it proved to be a large man, wearing a cheap frock waistcoat that had seen better days. Another similarly clad man appeared after the first, and before they knew it, a small band of pirates had poured out of the opening, swords and pistols drawn, and surrounded the Doctor and Mel.

"Hold right there!" one of the pirates stated gruffly.

"Oh, hello. I'm the Doctor, and this is…"

A sword blade appeared below the Doctor's nose and he stopped talking, staring cross-eyed at the sharp metal of a cutlass.

"Shut it," said the pirate holding the sword.

There were five pirates in total, and the one who appeared to lead the group stepped forward. He was youngish-looking with a scar across his cheek and longish brown hair tucked under a floppy hat. He walked up to the Doctor and stared at him for a brief moment before moving to Mel. A large pirate was standing behind Mel and had her arms pinned tightly in his giant hand. The lead pirate looked at Mel intently, his face a mix of fear and wonder.

"Someone would like a word with you," he said in a voice that sounded much more refined than Mel was expecting based on his gruff appearance.

The Doctor and Mel were taken through the hatch in the ground from which the pirates had appeared and found themselves once again walking through the tunnels of the inner workings of AmazingWorld!

"What's going on, Doctor?" Mel whispered. "Who are these people, and why are they dressed like pirates?"

The Doctor looked at her, and she didn't like the look behind his eyes.

"I'm afraid they aren't people," the Doctor said, guiding Mel's gaze with his eyes. She followed his line of sight to the back of one of the pirates in front of them. His arm was bandaged, but the bandage was worn and loose and falling away partially from the wound. Underneath, Mel could see burnt and damaged metal and grinding gears. As she looked around at the rest of the pirates, she could now see that their gait was slightly off as they walked, their eyes didn't blink and there was a slight scent of oil whenever they moved. Her eyes widened as she put it all together.

"I think we know why AmazingWorld! was shut down," she said.

They walked a long time, the corridors twisting and turning. No signs

adorned the walls here, but the pirates seemed to know where they were going. Soon the corridor inclined as they walked, and they passed through an exit into the open air once again, into what appeared to be an old ship port.

The place had seen better days, though Mel could tell it must have once been an impressive set. Now the facades of the fake ships were falling apart, and the water that probably had been a beautiful blue and maybe even housed fish, was now black and stagnant. One large ship was obviously more than just a background set piece. It was large and frightening and sat in the black water like a massive fortress. Pirates moved to and fro upon its deck, and Mel knew immediately that this must be the *Jolly Roger* from the Peter Pan stories. The pirates had taken them to the Neverland attraction.

As they were marched onto the docks, the Doctor was taken one way and Mel the other. She tried to call out to him as he moved away, but he was soon gone around a corner. Mel was forced up a gangplank towards the vast pirate ship, and she suddenly realized why pirates were sometimes the stuff of children's nightmares. She felt very alone and very afraid as she walked onto the deck of the pirate ship, the dead stares of the animatronic pirates adding to her sense of dread.

Illustration by Paul Cowan

The Doctor meanwhile was being ushered along to the end of the docks where a small building served as a gaol. The door was comprised of (probably artificial) bamboo poles with a comically oversized padlock attached to it. The door was unlocked, the Doctor was pushed unceremoniously inside and the door promptly locked again behind him. The Doctor turned to face the well-spoken leader of the gang that had captured them, looking at him through the bars of the locked door.

"What is happening here?" he asked. "Where are you taking Mel?"

The pirate turned to the Doctor with a slight look of puzzlement on its near-human face.

"Mel?" he asked.

"Yes," the Doctor said. "My companion."

"I do not know who you are, sir," the pirate said, "but you do not make sense." He turned to leave.

"Gentleman Starkey!" the Doctor yelled.

The pirate stopped and slowly turned back to the Doctor.

"That is your name, isn't it?"

Starkey nodded. "How do you know me, sir?"

"Oh," the Doctor said, all signs of anger gone from his face, replaced with a tired smile, "I know quite a lot. About you… about Captain Hook and his pirates. His war with the Indians and Lost Boys, and perhaps more recently with many, many others."

Starkey's expression grew amazed (or as close to amazed as his fake human features could simulate, and the Doctor was impressed with how much that was, even with the obvious signs of disrepair). Starkey looked like he wanted to say something, but instead turned on his heel and left the Doctor alone in the cell.

Mel was brought into a rather opulent chamber aboard the *Jolly Roger*. Her hands were quickly tied at the wrists in front of her by a stout, short pirate, but she was allowed to sit in a very comfortable armchair. The larger pirate who had been restraining her this whole time left the room.

There was a long silence as she sat there, looking around the room at the various trappings, the short pirate keeping an eye on her. Finally a door at the other end of the room opened, and a magnificent pirate who, Mel surmised, could only be Captain Hook, marched into the room. He wore an overcoat and shirt of brightest blue and white ruffles. His pantaloons were pressed and his boots reflected the room's light off their perfect shine. His black hair was long and curled and his mustaches gleamed. The tip of the hook on the end of his right arm was sharpened to a deadly point.

He glided across the room with effortless grace and stopped just short of the chair.

"Well!" he said, his voice was deep and commanding. Mel stared up at the animatronic Hook, impressed despite her fear. "Fancy this."

Mel waited.

"Tell me," Hook said after a long pause, taking a slightly more relaxed stance and leaning in a little towards Mel, "how did you survive the blast?"

"Excuse me?" Mel said. "What blast? What's going on here? Why am I being held prisoner?"

Hook and the short pirate both broke out in hysterical laughter.

"Do you hear, Smee?" Hook snorted. "What a joy! What a game!"

"Oh yes, Captain," Mr. Smee replied. "No one plays quite like Pan."

Mel looked from one to the other.

"Wait a minute…" she said. "You don't actually think that I'm Peter Pan?!"

Hook laughed again. "Still at the make believe, Peter? Ha! Good form, old friend, good form!"

"Oh, please!" Mel chortled. "I'm not even a boy!"

More uncontrolled laughter and mirth from Hook and Smee. Hook even danced around slightly.

"Oh, how I missed this, Peter!" Hook said, slapping his good hand on his knee. "When you were gone, it wasn't the same. Oh, I tried to play the game with others. Tiger Lily was no match for me…"

"The flower wilted under pressure," Smee confirmed.

"I beheaded that mouthy lion…" Hook continued.

"Aslan as I live, I'll not forget it," Smee cooed.

"The witch could not escape on her broom…" Hook bragged.

"It was a clean sweep," Smee agreed.

"And I sent that Moofus down his own tunnel!" Hook sang.

"Yes…" Smee said, then stood with his mouth open. He was thinking very hard. His face actually changed colours to a deep shade of red, and his cheeks wiggled as he thought. "You certainly did," he finally said.

Hook looked at Smee and frowned. Smee shrugged. Hook made a face that looked like he had swallowed a bug. Then he turned back to Mel.

"But none has been the enemy you have been to me, Peter. Oh the wonderful repartee!" Hook said, approaching Mel and slowly sliding the cold iron of the hook along her cheek, and then leaning down to whisper into her ear: "But my new Neverland does not have room for Peter Pan!"

With that, he twirled away and walked back towards the door from which he had entered.

"Tomorrow at dawn!" he yelled back. "You walk the plank and meet your doom. Once, and absolutely, for all!"

The Doctor sat in his cell, legs crossed, eyes closed. He had tried his sonic screwdriver on the lock of the cell, to no avail. So now he sat, putting together a hypothesis about what had happened on AmazingWorld! Of course it contained much conjecture, but he believed he had an idea of what had transpired.

It was known that trouble with AmazingWorld!'s animatronics had been what caused the theme world to shut down. It appeared to the Doctor that this trouble had been with the robot actors going completely out of control. Presumably the powers that be had shut down the park, including any and all

power to the robots. So how was it they were now running amok?

The Doctor was brought out of his reverie by a faint buzzing or fluttering noise. At first the Doctor thought perhaps Kaliope Minor had extremely large mosquitoes. However, when he looked up, he saw a tiny female form just in front of his face. She had green skin with long golden hair, pointed ears and nearly transparent wings that fluttered back and forth quickly as she hovered in the air in front of him. The little creature had her arms crossed in front of her chest and was staring at him intently.

"Hello, I'm the Doctor. And you must be Tinkerbell!"

"Why does everyone keep calling me that?!" the little creature cried, throwing her arms into the air.

"I'm terribly sorry," the Doctor replied, clearing his throat and smiling sheepishly. "I must be mistaking you for someone else. Let me begin again. I'm the Doctor, and you are?"

"My name is Taxtra. I'm a Ve'diran," she replied.

"Ah yes, of course," the Doctor said, nodding sagely. "From the Diran Cluster?"

"Yes," she said. "You're not from this world either, are you?"

"No," the Doctor said, "I am not."

Taxtra nodded. "I thought not. My ship crashed here a few weeks ago and that hook-handed robot found me. He let me go free as a pet for his crew, but he keeps my ship hidden and I've not been able to find it. I saw the others take that female onto the ship, and then heard one of them talking about the wizard they had in the gaol. Are you a wizard? Can you help me?"

The Doctor was not fully concentrating on Taxtra's tale after she had mentioned Mel.

"Wizard? What? Oh yes, I suppose I am, of sorts," he said. "Tell me, this female they took onto the ship. Was she all right?"

"She seemed unharmed," Taxtra stated, sighing with severe sadness. "I'm desperate, wizard. Can you help me get my ship back?!"

The Doctor stood. "That very much depends," he said, "on whether or not you can help me get out of here…"

Taxtra smirked and with a motion that defied physics, she reached into a tiny pocket and pulled out a human-sized set of keys.

Later that night, Starkey paced back and forth in front of the door to Hook's cabin. It opened finally and Mr. Smee ushered Starkey inside. Starkey nodded to Smee and then went to stand in front of Hook's desk. Hook was writing something in his log, smiling and humming to himself. Finally he put his quill down and looked up at Starkey.

"Yes, Mr. Starkey, what is it? I don't have all day you know. Executions to plan and all that," Hook said.

"Captain, it's the other prisoner. He's escaped, sir!" Starkey said. "I think that bloody fairy helped him."

Hook looked completely unperplexed. "Is that all?"

Starkey was taken aback. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Should I send out a search party?”

“Why?” Hook asked. “They have nowhere to go. We have Pan – that’s all I care about. After the execution, you may gather a party to hunt them down, but until then I want all hands at the ready! All must be present for Peter Pan’s final sunrise!”

“But sir!” Starkey pleaded. “Pan’s companion. He knew things, like he was reading my mind. I think he’s a wizard.”

This finally caught a tiny portion of Hook’s attention.

“Wizard? Ha! No, the only wizard in the new Neverland was found cowering behind a curtain, and he won’t be casting any more spells, will he, Mr. Smee?”

“Not without his fingers or tongue, sir,” Smee agreed.

Hook waved Starkey away. “After the execution, Starkey.”

Starkey wanted to state his case more. He knew this Doctor was a threat, but Hook would hear no more, and Mr. Smee ushered him out of Hook’s chambers.

After escaping the cell, Taxtra led the Doctor away from the pirate camp into the bog beyond. It was a foul smelling place, and the black water it contained drained into the port via small rivulets. The Doctor huffed and puffed as he tried to keep up with the Ve’diran. She fluttered and soared with ease through the murky foliage.

The Doctor finally stopped to rest against a giant moss-covered log when he was sure they were far enough from the pirate port.

“So, wizard,” Taxtra said, flitting quickly back and forth around the Doctor. “What spell will you cast upon the dreaded robots?”

“Well,” the Doctor started, “I haven’t quite formulated a… spell… just yet.”

Taxtra crossed her arms and screwed up her eyes at the Doctor.

He chuckled lightly and shook his head. He began to pat his hands on the log beside him as he thought. “Of course, we can’t just go in guns blazing as it were – we’re outnumbered. Now, much of the park’s original programming still seems to be in place, as Mr. Starkey still remembered the character he was modelled after. So I could try to use the Peter Pan story against them in some way…”

He looked down at his hands as he tapped his fingers along the log. Then he tilted his head and slid his hand along the surface of the trunk. Suddenly he hopped up and ran a few steps forward before turning to look at the giant log.

“Then again, why not do both?” He smiled as he pulled out his sonic screwdriver and approached the distinctly crocodile-shaped log.

Mel was more than a little worried now. She had half-expected the Doctor to barge onto the ship and do what he always does: talk his way out of this mess.

But a sleepless night had passed, and now she was being marched onto the main deck to walk the plank without sign of him. The pirates were so pirate-y (*arrr'ing* and *yarrr'ing* as they worked) that it would have been comical if it weren't for the utter madness surrounding her. By her count, there were only a dozen pirates in total coming and going, including Hook and Smee. Some were almost perfectly human in their appearance and actions, but others were showing signs of their robotic nature, either physically damaged or obviously with some sort of programing degradation.

As Smee and that large pirate led Mel onto the deck (this time her hands tied behind her back and a gag in her mouth), the other pirates on deck cheered and jeered. The sun was bright this morning, and Mel was now able to see how badly the ship and surrounding area had fallen into disrepair.

Hook stood beside the plank on the starboard side of the ship. He was acting nonchalant, smoothing his mustaches with his good fingers, but his eyes betrayed a greedy anxiousness. Arriving at the plank, the large pirate hefted her up onto the wooden board and she stood there, looking down at Hook.

"Well, lads!" Hook said, smiling at his crew as they gathered around. "What do you say?!"

The pirates all cheered, save Mr. Starkey who stood silently at the back of the group, looking around nervously.

"We thought we'd seen the last of the Pan when we levelled his home with a yell from our twenty-four-pounders!" Hook continued. "But as Blackbeard was fond of saying, 'There's many a slip twixt the cup and a lip.'"

The other pirates fell silent. They looked around at each other. One of them shrugged.

"Mr. Smee," Hook said.

"He means sometimes people still escape even when you blast their house with a great giant cannonball," Smee said to the crew.

They all smiled and nodded and agreed.

"But now we will watch the demise of the great Peter Pan with our own eyes. We shall hear his screams of death with our own ears. And we shall at last be free of this pest of a boy for evermore!"

The pirates cheered again. Hook waved with his good hand and Smee poked at Mel with a rapier. She yelped and slowly began to edge along the rotting wood. Tears filled her vision as she approached the end of the plank. Looking down, she could see the muck and blackness of the festering pool of water below.

The cheering was loud and rang in her ears. But then it slowly began to die down, fading into complete silence. No, not complete silence. Mel could hear something. She turned and could see that not a single pirate was watching her progress, not even Hook. They were all looking to port, to the gangplank leading to the docks. There was something on the breeze. A noise. A ticking.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

"No…" Hook breathed. "It can't be."

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The sound grew louder and louder still. It's rhythm was constant and true.

Mel found herself watching along with the rest. Suddenly, a tiny green figure flew above the port side of the ship. Mel had to blink through the tears and shake her head, unsure at what she was seeing. It was Tinkerbell. The fairy flitted close to Hook and smiled at him before blowing him a kiss. This partially snapped Hook out of his fear. He slashed at Tinkerbell with his hook, but she giggled and flew away.

The ticking grew to a crescendo, and above the port side deck rail, over the gangplank, rumbled a gigantic crocodile, full of holes and gashes showing off its robotic innards, but apparently none the worse for wear. And riding on its back, his umbrella held before him like a lance, sat the Doctor.

"Forget Peter Pan!" the Doctor cried. "I'm the original Lost Boy!"

The pirates scattered like dust in the wind, lead by Starkey. The huge robotic reptile rumbled onto the deck. Even Mr. Smee fled, diving overboard into the mire. Hook shook in his boots and stood there, eyes wide and mouth trembling.

"'Dark and sinister man,'" Hook whispered to himself and slowly held his arms wide. "'Prepare to meet thy doom.'"

And the crocodile opened its maw and swallowed James Hook.

The Doctor jumped down from the crocodile's back as it wallowed in its feast. He landed soft as an Olympic gymnast and had Mel's bindings undone in seconds. She hugged him as he helped her off the plank and onto the deck. It was empty now save for the two of them, the digesting crocodile and the little faerie.

The small creature was literally glowing with excitement.

"Doctor," Mel said, "is that Tinker—"

"No!" the Doctor interrupted quickly. "No, no. That's Taxtra. She's Ve'diran. My get-out-of-jail-free card. Much running ensued. I'll explain later."

The Doctor hung his umbrella onto his breast pocket by the handle and waved his sonic screwdriver around. He turned and turned until the signal lead him towards the stairs aft of the ship. Up the stairs he went. He pointed the sonic screwdriver at the door at the top and nodded. The Doctor flung the door open, stepped to the side and waved Taxtra inside. Taxtra, with a shout of glee, flew past the Doctor into the room. A moment later, a tiny crystalline globe flew out of the room. It circled the Doctor and pulsed with a green glow. The Doctor smiled and doffed his hat in salute. The Doctor and Mel watched the tiny ship fly off into the sky and out of sight.

"What are you looking for, Doctor?" Mel asked.

They were back in the park control room. The TARDIS, a welcome sight, was tucked into the corner. The Doctor was once again flipping through information on one of the monitors. The pictures and data were scrolling through at incredible speed, and Mel could not keep up.

"Just trying to confirm a hunch," the Doctor replied. "Aha!"

He pointed at the screen, and Mel looked down at a series of photos apparently taken by a satellite. The numbers and figures meant nothing to her,

but a section of space in the photos showed white streaks brushing across the night sky, with the label “Electrical Storm” and under that “Magnitude 6.8” written on it.

“An electrical storm?”

“Yes,” the Doctor said. “When the problem with the animatronics caused AmazingWorld! to shut down, they would have shut down all the power generators in the park. So how did the robots come alive again? My best guess was that either someone had deliberately turned them back on, or some sort of power surge must have reignited the spark.”

The Doctor pointed to the screen. “Reignition.”

He quickly flew back to the computer and began typing a series of commands onto its keyboard. Then he waved his sonic screwdriver around the room and everything hummed loudly for a moment, and then went completely dark.

“There,” he said, “that should do it. Come on, Mel. I think it’s time we left, don’t you?”

“I’ll say,” Mel said, following the Doctor into the TARDIS.

The doors closed, but their voices could still just be heard from within.

“Where to now?” the Doctor asked.

“Second star to the right,” Mel replied. “And straight on till morning.”

After the Ball Was Over

by Christopher Colley

PART 1 – DOCTOR

There are days when the fate of the Universe hangs in the balance, when the lives of billions are at stake and when the continued existence of everything everywhere hinges on a roll of the dice.

Fortunately today was not one of those days, and having put up with quite enough of that sort of thing lately, the Doctor was throwing a party.

He had parked the TARDIS (his space-time ship of dubious legal ownership) in orbit around an insignificant blue/green planet, at the latest fashionable altitude of three million feet. Suspended at a voguish, devil-may-care angle of 44 degrees, it hung in the silence of space. Silence, that is, broken by two sounds: first, the velvet tones of Frank Sinatra; and second, an exclamation of "It's not a party, Romana, it's a soirée…" – both emanating from inside the four-by-eight-foot ship.

There it sat, like a box waiting to be opened, wrapped in a ribbon of big-band swing.[1]

Deep within, not quite in the ship's bowels but perhaps somewhere near its pancreas, was a room that had no business orbiting anything at three million feet. Or at any altitude, come to that. An ivy-draped colonnade, all Doric capitals and ancient statuary… As rooms go, it is unlikely that UNESCO would have sanctioned it for dangerous interstellar travel (*Subcategory B: Go For It, Knock Yourself Out*).

Still, there it was in outer space.

Matching it for incongruity was the singular individual who now strode through it. A broad-brimmed fedora crowning his eccentrically coiffed locks, he sported a velvet frock coat so voluminous that in a previous life it may well have been an entire three-piece suite. The coat and its owner, a bohemian-looking fellow of imposing height, mingled with the other attendees.

The man paused as the Doctor offered him an appetizer.

"Petit four, Oscar?"

"Why, thank you, Doctor," said Oscar Wilde, inhaling his tenth asparagus vol-au-vent. "As I always say," he sprayed between gulps, "I can resist anything except temptation."

The Doctor flashed him a rictus grin. Notwithstanding Oscar's insistence on stealing all his best lines, the Doctor was forced to conclude that the soirée was a roaring success.

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[1] Its architects designed the TARDIS to be far larger inside than out. The reason for this was "to conserve a bit of space." The discovery of the transdimensional phenomena that make this possible has been called the greatest story of all time. It is utterly electrifying. It is also utterly excluded from these pages. The reason for this is to conserve a bit of space.

Things had got off to a terrific start with Oscar and Georgia O'Keeffe treating everyone to a spirited debate about modern art. This in turn prompted Frida Kahlo and Katsushika Hokusai to stage an impromptu portrait contest. (The sitter, Botticelli – happy to let someone else do the painting for a change – judged that it was Frida who had best captured his certain *je ne sais quoi*. Hokusai declined to speak to Botticelli for the rest of the evening.) Meanwhile, Salvador Dalí took it upon himself to redecorate the swimming pool, thereby ensuring that no one was ever able to find it again. Gertrude Stein's lecture on language and reality was the unexpected hit of the night. She had followed it up with fifteen minutes of surprisingly on-the-nose impersonations that brought the house down. In comparison, Will Shakespeare's balloon modelling was something of an anti-climax. "But he does it with such panache, darling," opined Plato to anyone who would listen. "The man could get away with anything. I mean, look at *Titus Andronicus*…"

Even Varplethim Bouléjax, enfant terrible of the Crab Nebula, seemed to be enjoying himself. The Doctor had been concerned that, as the only non-humanoid, Varple might feel left out on a limb (the outspoken arthropod had more than enough limbs to be getting on with already). Fortunately, Alfred Hitchcock had taken him under his wing. In return, Varple taught the director how to extrude his internal organs for kicks. In no time, the pair were extruding away like old friends.

Good old Alfred! thought the Doctor as he passed between guests, dusting Oscar's pastry crumbs from his scarf.

In short, everyone who was anyone was there, and everyone who was anyone was having a brilliant time.

It was around this point that the Doctor became aware of an urgent voice calling his name. *Typical…* he thought. Wherever he went in the Universe, there always seemed to be urgent voices calling his name. Sometimes he wished they would find something else to call. "Get your free profiteroles here" would be a good start.

He turned to see a young woman of about 180 striding urgently towards him. Her urgent blonde hair tumbled urgently about the shoulders of the 1920s trouser suit she was wearing in what seemed a strikingly urgent manner.

"Ah, Romana!" said the Doctor. "For a moment I was worried it was something urgent. Profiterole?"

"No, thank you. Doctor, there's something very wrong."

At this juncture, two thoughts struck the Doctor. The first was that Romana, despite her youth and inexperience, was quite often right about things. It followed, therefore, that there was a fighting chance something was indeed very wrong. The more pressing thought, however, was that Romana had just turned down a free profiterole. The Doctor had never knowingly passed up a cream puff, *chou à la crème* or any pastry come to that, and he preferred not to associate with people who did. He decided, however, there was nothing to be gained by arguing the point at the risk of spoiling the evening's conviviality. Swallowing his disappointment, he refocused his mind on Thought Number One, and scanned the room for any sign of Romana's "something very wrong."

(But he made a mental note to have a serious word with her later about the profiterole.)

Romana looked pityingly at him. "I'll give you a clue, shall I? Can't you hear that noise?"

The Doctor listened, then snapped his fingers. "Goodness, you're right! K9?" he bellowed into what appeared to be an ear trumpet sticking out of a nearby column. "K9, if you're in the music room, can you tell Frank he's had his turn? He can't hog the microphone all night! Tell him to give Ella and Louis a chance…"

Romana pursed her lips. "No. Not in the music room, Doctor. There's something wrong *up here*."

"Up here?" The Doctor boggled. "Up here? What could possibly be wrong *up here*? Why, everything's going swimmingly! I know Oscar can be a bit of a boor…"

"It's nothing to do with that nauseating oaf. Or Sinatra for that matter." Romana swept a blonde lock behind her ear. "I'm talking about the enormous blob."

The Doctor was appalled. "Romana! That's no way to talk about Henry…" He manoeuvred her away from an ermine-swathed figure chatting in the corner. "He may not be the man he was at his coronation, but he can still play a lute like nobody's business. Which reminds me…" He drew her closer. "You know how everyone thinks *he* wrote 'Greensleeves'? Well, what happened was, I'd been invited to stay at Windsor. Not one of its better suites. Ground level. Well, sub-ground level. Oubliette. It was a misunderstanding. Anyway, I was bored one day…"

"No," said Romana. "Not that enormous blob." She pointed across the room. "*That* enormous blob." Bubbling away in the centre of the quadrangle, like someone's idea of a pièce de résistance, was a gigantic casserole dish, about the size of a small disaster waiting to happen.

The Doctor blinked. "Do you mean my neutron flan?"

Romana's patient smile left no doubt in the Doctor's mind that his neutron flan was precisely what she meant.

"And may I ask what's so 'very wrong' with it?"

Romana raised her eyebrows. "Oh, nothing," she said, pacing in a ring around her interlocutor. "Nothing at all. That is, if you ignore the hostile twanging, popping sound emanating from it."

"Ah!" The Doctor flapped a hand. "Oh, that! My dear old thing – why, that's nothing to be worried about. It's just simmering down. Letting off steam! That's the sound of a good pudding, that's all.

"Listen," he went on, "I'm famed for my neutron flan throughout the Galaxy. Ask the Thrataquintans of Thrata-5! All that saving-the-Universe business I get up to is secondary to them. Say the name 'Doctor' to that lot, and do you know what they'll say back? Flan!"

"There's a good reason for that, Doctor…"

Before Romana could finish her thought, something said "MASTER" from about knee-level. Unobserved by the time travellers, a small robot dog had

joined them during their last exchange, adding another urgent voice to proceedings.

"Not now, K9." The Doctor soldiered on: "Look, Romana, my neutron flan is a work of art. *The densest dessert in the Galaxy!* Trillions of neutrons held in quantum stasis – caught in the balance just so – baked in a hot oven for fifty minutes, and lovingly drizzled with caramel. It's a marvel of culinary engineering. And it's never, ever gone wrong!"

Romana nodded and resumed circling. "That's interesting, Doctor. Because in his Miscellany of Intergalactic Cooking Disasters, Zurjis Threeamoll states: 'If a flan's quantum degeneracy pressure is compromised'" – she shot the Doctor a look – "'usually by sub-standard practices in the kitchen – then a hostile twanging, popping sound will presage total gravitational collapse.'"

The Doctor swallowed. "Total collapse?"

"Total."

The neutron flan spat violently. Like most disasters waiting to happen, it had impeccable timing.

"MASTER!"

"Shut up, K9!" The Doctor took a step away from the casserole dish, now rocking alarmingly. "That's very odd. I followed the instructions to the letter. An excellent recipe book, too. Written by an absolute master. Really knows his stuff."

"This author – he wouldn't happen to be you, would he, Doctor?"

"I like your outfit."

Romana's palm went to her forehead. "Doctor, what have you done?"

The flan belched again. Charles Dickens eyed it suspiciously and moved to the other side of the buffet table.

"MASTER… URGENT… *MISTRESS!*"

Romana knelt by the robot's side. "What is it, K9?"

The Doctor sensed the room start to vibrate. "Romana, do you know I think there's something very wrong?" he said.

"GRAVITATIONAL CONTRACTION IMMINENT!"

"That's what I just said, K9 – something very wrong."

Romana leant in closer. "How long to contraction, K9?"

"COLLAPSE IN ONE-POINT-FIVE-EIGHT SECONDS, MISTRESS!"

Before the Doctor could say "Well, why didn't you say so?" everything went more or less entirely bad.

Have you ever considered the lettuce? It boasts one of nature's more tragic lifecycles – not dissimilar in many ways to that of humankind. The miserable vegetables spend most of their lives trying to make sense of existence, only to wind up as compost. It is much the same for lettuces. Wrapped in soil by over-protective parents, their youthful life experiences are limited (generally to pH levels of 6.0 to 6.8). When they are finally big enough to start rubbing leaves with the other lettuces, the poor things are wrenched from the bosom of their nurseries and sent to work in supermarkets. They endure all the trials of early adult life… Cramped living conditions in refrigerator drawers… Antisocial housemates who insist on turning on the light at all hours to get a can of Coke…

Finally, just when they are starting to think they have a handle on things, someone comes and sticks them in a salad spinner. It is pretty much all downhill from then on.

Existentially speaking, the Doctor and his guests found themselves in a similar place.

As the neutron flan collapsed in on itself, the TARDIS went pinwheeling out of orbit. To appreciate the centrifugal force experienced by the TARDIS's occupants, you might imagine a salad leaf in a spinner being operated by a particularly mischievous nine-year-old boy. Better still, you could try asking said leaf about its experience in the spinner. Its lack of coherence would speak volumes.

A loud hum pervaded the room. Ears ringing, the Doctor clawed himself to his full height, inching his way up the wall against which he found himself pressed. He peered through the dim emergency lighting. All about him, his soirée was in disorder. Most of his guests were sprawled, dishevelled, in extraordinary postures about the room's perimeter. Picture an out-of-control bicycle careering downhill towards the rider's certain death; the celebrities around the walls shared much in common with hypothetical bugs flattened against its front tire. The remaining guests, having managed to grab a column each, were thus experiencing life as the bicycle's spokes. Suspended at shoulder-height, facing the floor, they clung on like human windsocks, as if something highly unpleasant might happen if they let go. Which was a fair analysis of the situation.

Benches and tables were plastered against the walls. There was blancmange *everywhere*. And there, in the middle of it all, was the flan, warping and splintering like a politician's promises.

"Just look at it!" said Romana from where she was pinioned near the Doctor's right-hand side. Irritatingly, he thought, she had managed to remain looking surprisingly well presented.

"Mm – impressive, isn't it?"

A rotund Tudor king flew across the room, having lost his grip on a column. He landed in a heap next to Virginia Woolf and Bob Dylan.

"It's beautiful," Romana countered. All around the casserole dish, the fabric of space-time shimmered, seeming to bulge and shift. "What's it doing?"

"THE DESSERT IS SLOWLY BREAKING DOWN, MISTRESS, UNDER THE FORCE OF ITS OWN GRAVITY," K9's voice buzzed at her, from somewhere near the ceiling. "ONCE NEUTRON DEGENERACY PRESSURE IS OVERCOME, GRAVITATIONAL COLLAPSE WILL BE COMPLETE."

Romana nodded. "Like a mini black hole. *The densest dessert in the Galaxy*," she recalled.

"Well, quite," the Doctor said. "An object that massive, you can't just carry it to the door and tip it out. In a few minutes, we'll be sucked into that thing like butterscotch filling." He dragged a finger along the inside of his collar. "You could call it a sticky end."

"CORRECTION, MASTER," said K9, who had very little time for even considerably better jokes than that one. "TERMINATION OF PERSONS ONBOARD WILL PRECEDE COLLAPSE, OWING TO IMPACT."

"Impact? What impact?"

"*OUR* IMPACT, MASTER. WITH THE PLANET TERRA."

"*What?"*

Romana connected the dots. "Of course! Don't you see? The gamma energy released by that dessert of yours knocked the TARDIS out of orbit. We're on collision course!"

The Doctor shrugged. "I suppose the best we can do is hope for an ocean landing – I parked over Indonesia after all…"

"But why?"

"Well, it's a scenic spot."

Romana was growing exasperated. "No, Doctor – not 'Why Indonesia?' I mean, why simply cross our fingers for an ocean landing when we could try to *do* something about it instead?"

The Doctor smiled. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Well, you could reset the coordinates for a start. We could move everyone out of here and try jettisoning the room…"

"FOUR MINUTES TO IMPACT."

"You heard the man, Romana: I can't crawl all the way to the control room in four minutes! Besides, we're on auxiliary lighting, in case you hadn't noticed – I doubt we've enough power for a reconfiguration manoeuvre like that…"

The rotational velocity of the room seemed to increase. The Doctor felt his teeth start to ache as the hum stepped up a notch.

"Excuse me." A voice from somewhere above the Doctor's left shoulder piped up. "Am I to understand from your discussion, Doctor, that this is not some clever after-dinner amusement and is, in fact, a matter of life and death?"

The Doctor looked over. A mass of velvet appeared to be engaging him in conversation. "Ah, Oscar, there you are! How nice! Yes, I'm afraid that's about the size of it."

"Oh, my dear, how very disappointing." A glimmer crept into the epigrammatist's eye. "As I always say…"

"Here we go," muttered Romana.

"One can survive everything nowadays except death." If previously there had been no such thing as a facial expression that suggests its owner expects a standing ovation from a roomful of incapacitated VIPs in space, then Oscar had just invented it.

"Oscar," said the Doctor patiently, "if you're going to keep using my lines without proper attribution, you're going to have to figure your own way out of this mess. In fact, from now until we're smashed to smithereens, I don't want to hear another quip, quote or saying – is that clear? No more 'I've nothing to declare except my genius.'"

Romana joined in: "No more 'Work is the curse of the drinking classes.'"

"NO MORE 'HANDBAGS'!" added K9.

The Doctor was relishing this. He racked his brain for another bon mot, settling on a Wildean reworking of an old proverb in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. "And no more 'When poverty creeps in at the door, love flies in through the…'" He tailed off.

Romana looked at him. "Doctor? Doctor, what is it?"

"TWO MINUTES TO IMPACT."

The Doctor spoke swiftly: "It might just work… We haven't enough power for a full-blown reconfiguration, *but*... if we tap into the mainframe, we may be able to open up a…"

"Of course!"

"K9?" the Doctor called. "Can you reverse the polarity of your outer shell to push yourself away from the wall?"

"NEGATIVE, MASTER – CENTRIFUGAL FORCE TOO STRONG."

"Yes, I was afraid you might say that… Never mind, I'll have to do it myself. I can link in my occipital lobe to complete the circuit!"

Romana hated it when he got that excited look while talking about the dangerous stuff. "But Doctor, do you know what that means?"

"Well, it's just a fancy term for the visual centre of the brain."

Romana sighed. "I know what an occipital lobe is. I'm talking about the synaptic energy required. It could drain your mind!"

"Doctor," said Oscar Wilde. "I want you to know I'm extremely upset." But the Doctor was not listening. He was already leaping into action.

Very, very slowly.

While his guests looked on, the Doctor hauled himself to the floor, then across it, yard by yard. He was heading for the column with the ear trumpet. His multi-coloured scarf jutted out behind him like wings on a Concorde that had decided to celebrate Mardi Gras. Every so often, his palms would slip. He would slide backward towards the wall, accompanied by a chorus of gasps from his audience (who were now experiencing the two main definitions of suspense simultaneously). Gradually, the Doctor neared the pillar. A fragment of casserole dish escaped the flan's force field and whizzed across the room.

"Doctor, watch out!" Romana called.

The Doctor looked up, yanking his hand out of the way. The fragment sparked across the floor where his wrist had been a moment previously, and embedded itself in the wall behind him. "Close one, Doctor," he murmured. "Dear old arms… take your last embrace." He resumed crawling towards the column.

"ONE MINUTE…"

Finally in reach of his objective, the Doctor grabbed the ear trumpet to pull himself to his feet. The panel on which it was mounted came away under his weight and sailed across the room, exposing the mechanism within. Not to put too fine a point on it, it was a mess. The wiring inside the column gave every impression of having grown as organically as the ivy that covered the outside. A disreputable electrician would have taken one look at it, sucked in his cheeks, and intimated, fairly for once, that it was gonna cost yer to sort this lot. A reputable electrician would probably have burst into tears.

The Doctor managed to catch hold of the opening before his boots lost their purchase. All at once, he found himself parallel to the floor, clinging to the lip with his left hand. He rummaged inside the cavity with his right. He could feel the circuitry that maintained the room's outer plasmic structure. He could also feel his grip beginning to tire. Painstakingly, he teased apart the wires, then started groping in his pockets for something or other. Boiled sweets and all manner of jetsam spilled out, ricocheting about the room like shrapnel. Romana could barely watch as the Doctor produced some adhesive plasters, somehow managing to attach them to his temples. He slid the wires underneath.

"TWENTY SECONDS…"

The Doctor breathed. He hoped for the best. Then he started to visualize with all his might.

There was a wrenching, grinding noise, as a glowing horizontal slit, about three feet across, appeared in the space the Doctor had vacated on the wall.

"Come on, old girl, you can do it…"

The slit began to widen vertically. Then a beam and a crossbeam appeared. And a set of curtains either side. In a moment, it was a perfect sash window, complete with glass panes. Beyond it, a spinning vista of islands then sky, islands then sky. The islands were drawing nearer…

"Everybody hang on!" the Doctor called. "Romana?"

"Ready!"

"When I give the word…"

"TEN SECONDS…"

"*Now!*"

Romana threw up the lower sash. The guests on the facing walls held on as if their lives depended on it. Which, again, was a fair analysis of the situation. The air leaving the room ripped everything that was not nailed down towards the outside world… including the flan. It tumbled across the room, and *out,* vaulting over the windowsill. As the massive object left its gravitational field, the TARDIS jolted, whirling out of its collision spiral. There was a deep boom, then a wave of aftershock as the pudding thudded into the planet's surface.

"Shut the window!" the Doctor yelled. Romana did so. The TARDIS slowly ceased spinning and its occupants tumbled to the floor again.

"TWO SECONDS… ONE… IMPACT AVERTED."

The lighting returned to normal. Ella and Louis started up in the music room. The crisis was over.

The Doctor picked himself up and peeled the plasters from his head. A pile of velvet was flailing next to him on the floor, like a pile of velvet might if it had just been told it was responsible for its own dry cleaning bill. The Doctor offered a hand.

"Oscar, old chap! Up you come!"

A sweaty face emerged from the rising heap. "Thank you, Doctor. May I enquire… what on Earth just happened?"

The Doctor beamed. "You saved the day, Oscar!"

"I did?"

"Well, you provided the inspiration… But six of one, and the sum of the cubes of 17-over-21 and 37-over-21 of the other, eh?"

"But… but how?"

The Doctor cleared his throat. "When misery creeps in at the door, then flan flies out the window!"

Oscar had never felt more miserable. "That… isn't really something I become known for saying – is it?"

"What? No. Well, something like that. Listen – don't worry, Oscar! If I were you, I'd get used to the idea of being misquoted for the next few millennia. Now, why don't you run along over there and try my signature Magellanic mousse? King Adolf of Sweden says it's to die for…"

Romana was standing by the window looking out. The Doctor joined her. Outside, planet Earth rolled by lazily. Tiny snakes of fire played out across one of the islands in the Indonesian archipelago.

"What did it hit?"

The Doctor squinted. "Sumatra, by the look of it."

"Will many people have been killed?"

The Doctor did not answer at once. Romana looked at him.

"Doctor?"

"Hmm?"

"Will many people have been killed? By the impact?"

"No. I told the TARDIS to pick a quiet period in Earth's history – no noise, no light pollution. Homo sapiens won't reach Indonesia for another fifteen thousand years at least. Clearly not keen on coffee. Ha. That's the trouble with humans, no sense of priorities…"

His words were chosen to reassure, but there was something that unsettled Romana, something she could not precisely identify. Perhaps it was his body language, somehow at odds with his bright, breezy tone. He stood staring fixedly out of the window. The expression on his face – could it have been pain? He blinked. Then he looked at her and grinned. And there was the Doctor once more. Romana shrugged her considerable brain and chalked it up to the Doctor's age.

The Doctor returned his gaze to the view outside. Romana did the same. Beyond the planet's curvature, the vista filled with the lights of other worlds and distant suns.

"By the way, Doctor," Romana said. "You realize that on Thrata-5, 'flan' means 'Get off our planet,' don't you?"

The Doctor considered this. "I thought they could have looked happier to see me…"

The insignificant blue/green planet drifted slowly past. These unsophisticated backwoods of the Galaxy were not without their charms after all. Just then, Romana felt a clammy, meaty hand upon her shoulder as someone interposed himself between the Doctor and her. The aroma of Magellanic mousse enveloped them both.

"A marvellous evening, my friends!" Oscar had perked up enormously with the sudden injection of sugar. "Pity about the flan, eh? Still, as I always say: to lose *one* flan…"

"Go away, Oscar," the Doctor said quietly. "Some of us are looking at the stars."

The aesthete departed, hunting in his coat for a notebook, as the last glimpse of Earth rolled silently out of view. Romana smiled, and touched the Doctor's sleeve. "Come on," she said. "Let's get back to your party."

Somewhere in Indonesia, an extraordinary dessert finally broke down. It pulled all matter within ten miles into itself, then blinked out of existence. As segments of the Earth's crust disappeared, the TARDIS drifted in the silence of space – a silence broken only by Ella and Louis singing "Heaven… I'm in heaven," and by someone saying "For the umpteenth time, Romana! It's not a party, it's a soirée…" And as everyone's cares seemed to vanish like a gambler's lucky streak, the TARDIS left Earth's orbit and spun gently out of sight.

PART II – ROMANA

Tuesday, 42nd of Hoob, 310268

Dear Diary,

So… D has pushed off again. If I were to attempt to diagnose his condition, I'd call it selective mutism, symptomatic of deep-rooted compensatory narcissism characterized by post-traumatic episodes of depressive melancholia. But I was never much good at elementary psychology. Really starting to lose patience with him. I was hoping we might have turned a corner by now.

Yesterday I took him to see the Lumina Galaxia. *Very* long journey. Obviously it's impossible to program coordinates without switching off the randomizer, like D is always doing. (I've told him he's altogether too blasé about that – but will he listen?) So I had to fly the TARDIS in on manual. Sixty thousand light years from Galactic Centre, but worth every parsec. At least *I* thought so.

We were lucky – there were hardly any interplanetary day-trippers there (the stellar cruise liners had left for the day), and ionizing conditions were just right. I found a spot at the confluence of two particularly high-energy cosmic rays. The solar wind was in our hair. We sat side-by-side in the doorway of the TARDIS as the light show played around us. Vivid blue, cherry pink, emerald, gold… Auroral arcs of dizzying size billowed past us like mountain

mist. You might say it was breathtaking, if you were the sort of person to favour a platitudinous approach to galactic phenomena, over a systematic program of scientific analysis and debate.

Which obviously D is. And so I did my best to make it *his* sort of excursion. I'd brought fruits from Eden and crystal shells of Floranan cephalopods, which I filled with nectar from Deva Loka, gathered by the last known colony of the Sanders hummingbee. And I made conversation about art and life and eternity. And as we sat there, light-emitting protons from the aurorae silted up against the TARDIS and around our feet – like bioluminescent life forms on the shorelines of Earth, or fireflies caught in gossamer.

It was all really rather interesting.

I told D it was a surprise to celebrate our hundredth anniversary of travelling together. Forty-eight years too early, I know. But I'm running out of ideas.

Eventually, the final tourists departed and we were the only ones left. When the Lumina started to thin, we dusted the fading particles from our boots, and I set the randomizer for dematerialization. All in all, it was a round trip of thirteen-and-a-half hours. And he never spoke to me once.

He barely has in weeks. Things have been different since the incident.

I understand now, of course. Once the pieces fell into place, it became easier to fathom – though fathoming D is never easy, at the best of times. At first I thought it was *me*, something *I'd* done (typical low-level cognitive distortion, very unlike me). He'd go hours without making eye contact. From time to time, we'd exchange some words, but he'd be looking the other way or over my head. Obviously that's nothing new; I'm used to being sulked at. I assumed I was just in his bad books for some reason. Something to do with that silly party of his, most likely.

But clearly I was right to feel that something was different. I sensed it the moment I saw him looking out of the window, staring at the planet post-impact. I remembered where I'd seen that look before. It's the expression he gets when he's trying to remember how to activate the multiloop stabilizer, without letting on that, after centuries of flying the TARDIS

without it, he's forgotten what it even looks like. I could tell there was something nagging at him, from the back of his temporal cortex, some half-remembered fragment of Something Very Important, screaming for attention.

Unfortunately, it was competing with all manner of useless data about fishing, *crème pâtissière* and Beatrix Potter.

So, predictably, D forgot all about it. And in fairness, if he hadn't disappeared a couple of days later, I'd have forgotten too. I suppose that first disappearance marks the moment the data finally crossed his neural pathways.

Illustration by Simon A. Brett

Yesterday he vanished again, right before our trip to the Lumina. It must have been the half-dozenth time, at least. When he came back, I tried to get through to him. Not that there's anything to say that I haven't already said, many times over the past weeks. I mean, that first morning, when I woke to find we'd landed, no sign of D and nothing but wasteland outside, *the first thing I did* was plug into the TARDIS memory core and pull out any records on prehistoric Indonesia. That's when I learned about Mount Toba. I've been trying to reason with him ever since.

Actually, I vaguely remember reading about the Toba supereruption when I worked in the Bureau of Ancient Records. It was presented as a discredited Earth theory, included only to illustrate humans' tendency towards exaggeration. As I recall, the information was filed under *Homo Sapiens, reactions thereof: Hysteria*. There was no mention of it having been a near-extinction event – which is beginning to look like something of an omission. Clearly our Time Lord policy of observation should be supplemented with stronger glasses.

In any event, I didn't make the connection until D started acting so uncharacteristically. Flouncing off by himself like that – for goodness' sake! The pathological show-off that he is, he must have realized long ago you can't be the centre of attention by yourself. For all his protesting that he'd rather travel solo, he knows he needs someone else to witness his ~~brilliance~~ buffoonery. He wouldn't dream of passing up an opportunity to showboat. Hence my surprise that first morning, to find he'd wandered off into some primeval wilderness alone.

Of course, now it's almost a daily occurrence. I wake each day to find he's piloted us back to prehistoric Earth, disabling the randomizer in spite of the risk. I don't know what he gets up to. How can I? He won't tell me. Helping, probably. Interfering. Trying to ease his misplaced sense of guilt. I've a good mind to follow him next time, but I've told him he should leave well enough alone. What's done is done. It's in the history books, for Rassilon's sake! And D knows as well as anyone – you can't change history.

You can feel sympathy, of course. "Ash clouds to hide the sun for a generation" is the last weather forecast that anyone would want. Ironically, it's also the last that many would have got – after Toba, millions die. But it's a matter of record. It had to happen. True, I doubt that anyone theorized the "it" would be a pudding from space. (As theories go, that would have sounded like pie in the sky.) But I suppose a flan is as good as anything else. On the day, something had to trigger Toba's eruption. It's almost poetic that it was someone's last course.

At least, it *would* be poetic, except… the incident isn't even really all that final, is it? I've tried explaining this to D. The human race *survives*. Five thousand individuals in scattered communities – they outlive the volcanic winter. They go on to repopulate the planet. It's that same diminished gene pool that ultimately gives rise to everything D loves about the place. Barcelona. The Mona Lisa. Even that dear old Neanderthal, Oscar. In fact, one could argue – and I have done, repeatedly – that D's inadvertent intervention makes room for the DNA that will one day coalesce to form the Wildes, the Gaudís, the Leonardos of the world. By reducing competition, D establishes the breathing space necessary for those traits to flourish. Like I told him, it makes him sound rather godlike really. I thought that might appeal to his egomania. Not a bit of it. I don't know if he even heard me.

And now he's gone again. Same old story: TARDIS doors ajar, no sign of D… But he hasn't taken us to the Cenzoic this time. Oh, no. This time it's sixteenth century southern France. Which baffled me, until I remembered – wasn't it Mme Nostradamus who knitted his scarf? If he's visiting his favourite costumier again, it can only mean one thing. It means he's decided—

Oh, but I'm bored with writing about the silly man! Action and reaction – if you can't handle the consequences, don't act the fool in the first place. If he wants to indulge his martyr complex, he can do so on his own time. The Universe is too big and interesting for me to fester away here, mollycoddling his asceticism.

You know, travelling with D has been enormous fun. His love of the thrill of discovery… it's infectious! Disembarking on an unknown planet and being the first

aliens to tread its soil. Solving insoluble problems that have baffled the locals for generations. Sitting down to converse with new races and species… and then offering them a profiterole. D genuinely enjoys sharing those experiences with someone. With a best friend. And it's been my privilege to play that part. I've learned a lot. Now perhaps it's time to be my own Time Lady.

No rash decisions, Romana! Give him space. In time, D can learn to operate within a semblance of normal behaviour patterns again, I'm sure of it. Well, pretty sure.

Still… Is it just possible that something fundamental has changed? Is it just possible things may be a little less fun from now on? I wonder if it's time to grow up.

PART III – LITTLE MOTHER

Outside, the wind lifts and brings the smell of the bodies to my nose. I turn my head away as the scent embraces me. I retch and try not to fear. I do not breathe. I remind myself, it is not the breath of my mothers that now enfolds me. This is not their summons. If I should breathe this air, though it is filled with death, I shall not immediately die. Still I do not breathe. The pain is in my chest. I remember the word he gave me. *Putrescence*. To name a thing is to take its teeth. That is the truth that he taught me. And, remembering, I am no longer afraid. I breathe again, inhale this *putrescence*. It is too ripe, too sweet. I turn my body to the side and I vomit.

I do not die. And I am not afraid.

In time, the wind returns to sleep, and I to my work. And I sit, and I wait for the Wilderman.

That is what my father called him. It has been a long time since the Wilderman was last here. A season or more, I think. It is difficult to reckon such things now, ever since the sky went grey. I remember the first time he came to the Valley. From far away, we heard a sound like a dying animal. Then he came to us, a tall, wild shape approaching through the mist, the hair on his head like a bear's in winter. He had under his arm a container that he had somehow fashioned from reeds. The skins he wore were not like ours. So many colours, some I cannot name, some I had never seen before. We all of us held our children close, or pressed our faces to the dead Land. He said we should not fear him. His voice was like thunder beyond the mountains, but his words were soft and warm. Then he placed down the container and named it *basket*. It was filled with roots and tubers. And we ate as we had not eaten in many suns.

Almost always he comes alone. Last time, while he tended to me in my sickness, I believed for a moment I saw a woman watching from a distance. In strange skins, like him. Her hair the colour of morning. There was concern on

her face. Then the mist rose in my eyes, and I lost her from my sight. Another time, he brought with him a small god that wore the shape of an animal. He brought it, he said, to help make my daughter well. The god placed its eye on my daughter's head and said some words that I did not understand, though the Wilderman did. Then he and I gathered mosses and moulds, and I watched as the god made embers with his nose, and together the man and his god transformed the things we had gathered into paste. The Wilderman gave the paste to my daughter to eat. Within two suns, she was well again.

The sun must be at the top of the sky now. Through the dim light, I look at the stones in my hands. My hands that are broken and red. For nine suns, since the rains returned, we have been without flame. And the gods have thrown no spears of fire, so I must draw it from the stones the way he taught me. But the wood is bad and the flames do not catch. I look towards my daughter. She is sleeping by the wall of the cave. How can she live if I cannot give her warmth? How will she travel on to the Garden of our Mothers if I am unable to turn her body to smoke on the day that she dies?

I turn my face towards the place of death. The three who died today. The two who died yesterday. My brother, my father and all who died since we lost the fire. It is too late for them. Never now will they sit together in the Garden of our Mothers, knowing the warmth of the sun as it kisses their necks.

Through the rain, I see the shapes of mounds of earth and piles of stone. After the fire went out, we placed those who died within the earth. At least that way, no animals would desecrate their flesh. But the Land is cold and hard. After a time, we could dig no more. When the next of our family died, we placed stones over her body instead. Soon we no longer had the strength to break more rocks. The two who died yesterday and the three who died today, they lie at a distance, side-by-side, uncovered on the surface of the earth. Now we are alone, my daughter and I. And, gods forgive me, I pray now that the animals will come to feast on the bodies, so that I may hunt to feed my child. And now the animals do not come.

My daughter stirs. I watch her shiver in the grey light. And so I work, the way he showed me. The grey stone and the white. Over and over. The fire falls on the tinder. Not enough. I fan and I blow. And my hands bleed and my belly aches. Later, I must find food. But first, I must raise the fire. The grey stone and the white. Over and over. I must raise the fire, for my daughter and for me.

I hear a sound like a dying animal. Like the agonies of the Land at the end of all things. And I know he is coming. In the white distance, through the rain, I see it appear. That tall shape we know so well, with four sides. The colour of the sky before rain or the ocean at sunrise.

And now I see him. He walks towards me. He moves slowly, like a man bearing many bodies to the pyre. He looks old, far older than I knew him. And his skins are not as they were before. He used to bring colours. So many colours. Now I see only one. And all at once I feel afraid. Somehow I know I shall not see him again after this. I shut my eyes and I give my fear a name. I say this is our final encounter. I will remember every moment. And I look again as he approaches slowly, gently. Broken and red.

He sees me and he smiles. The saddest smile I have ever known. And he looks at me with his eyes like the sky after rain or the ocean at sunset, and he asks me to tell him how it has been. So I tell him.

He says he liked my father very much, and my brother also. He says he is sorry to know that he will not see them again. He asks about my daughter. I say she is no longer sick, but she is cold. He looks to where she is sleeping on the mat of rushes. He goes to her, and he sets down his *basket* and opens it. And I see colours. He reaches in and tears off a piece of his old, coloured blanket, and he places it around my daughter's body, and another under her head. And he places his hand on her forehead. He does not disturb her. And he sits and he watches her for a time.

Now he returns to me. He places the other part of his old, coloured blanket about my shoulders. I tell him I am grateful. He looks sad and says I should not thank him. I ask why he no longer desires his old skins, why his new skins are the colour of blood. He tells me an old friend wove them for him. He says it is the colour of penance among his people. Part of his punishment, he says. So that everyone may see, and know what he has done. I say I cannot believe he has anything to be penitent for. He talks of action and reaction. He says he never learns. He uses words like *pluto*, *zanak* and *sevateem*, and talks of leaving when the real work starts, abandoning others to solve problems that are of his making. He is a good man, I tell him. He shakes his head and looks away.

We sit and talk about many things. He asks many questions. He always does. About the Day of Thunder, and how it was when the sky went grey. I tell him of the Last Journey, and about the Seasons of Ash. Of the Long Blindness, and the Crying Snows. About the First Deep Winter, and the Second. I tell him how it was when the Land became our master, and the Time of the Hard Earth began. That was when the People started dying in greater numbers. And he sits and he listens, and I sense that he feels every word like a spear inside him. But always he bids me to continue.

I ask if he knows where the animals have gone. He smiles and tells me they will return someday, when the Valley is rich and green again. They may not be as I knew them, he says, but sometimes things must change to survive. Everything has its season. He leans back in the earth and continues to talk, and I do not know if he is speaking to me. He sweeps an arm across the sky, which he calls *universe*. He says it is filled with numbers and logic and things he does not understand. He talks of growing old, and says maybe there is no room in the *universe* for the great, wild beasts any more. I tell him, perhaps it is as he said, perhaps the great, wild beasts must change too. He looks at me and smiles his sad smile. And he nods his head, and says no more.

The rain has stopped. I had not noticed.

Now the sky outside darkens. The wind carries the *putrescence* towards us, and he knows there is one last thing he must do for me. He takes from his pocket a thin object and aims it at the small circle of tinder. There is a sound like insects in the meadow. I imagine I can hear them, ghosts from long ago. The tinder blooms red and orange with flame. I help him build the fire and lay the kindling.

We work in silence. We each know the task ahead of us. Together we walk towards the place of death.

I tell him it is too late to save their spirits. He says he knows, but even so it is not good to breathe their air. I hesitate, and he understands. He tells me again, it is not the breath of my mothers. He says it does not work like that. He talks of disease and contamination, and other things I do not understand. And I am reassured.

The bodies are burning now. We watch at a distance, from the mouth of the cave. Five tongues of fire reach into the *universe*. Sparks separate and flash against the great plane of the sky, like the stars that used to be. He stands beside me for a while, the torch burning in his hand. Now he passes it to me. He says not a word, but I know his time with me is coming to an end. I promise him I will keep the fire burning. He tells me there are roots and tubers in the *basket*. For a moment he touches my shoulder. And now he starts to walk away.

I call after him. I beg him to take me with him, me and my child. He stops, and he turns. And he looks older than ever. He says that he cannot. That he wishes he could. Everyone is worthy of life and belonging, he says. And he tells me he never understood the big deal about *oscar wilde* in any case. But there are rules he has to learn. I do not know what he means, but he turns. And amid the darkness he is gone. I realize I forgot to ask him about the woman, with her hair the colour of morning.

A sound like a dying animal, like the dreaming of the ocean, reverberates across the Valley. I return to my daughter. The noise has awakened her. In one hand, she holds a root that the Wilderman brought. In the other she holds something else, which must also have been in the *basket*. A small rock, the colour of the sky before rain. She presses it against the wall and draws a tall shape with four sides.

I sit and I hug my knees to my chest as I look out at the *universe*, black and empty, edged with fire. And I think about him. As I know I always will. I think about his penance. About his care for us. I wonder what he may have done, and I hope he finds his peace.

As I sit, I place more sticks on the fire. I watch them shift and change in the blackening heat. Everything has its season, and I have known the season of the Wilderman. I look at my daughter, drawing happily in the dancing light. And I wonder how much longer our season will endure.

A Torch in the Darkness IV: The End of a Legend

by David N. Smith & Violet Addison

The cold sea water rolled up around Clara, the spume breaking across her, its freezing touch forcing her harshly into consciousness.

She gasped for air, as she dragged herself, wheezing and shivering, out of the ocean's deadly grip. The touch of the Weeping Angel had not only cast her into some unknown time and place, it had also plunged her into the ocean, so far from shore that she had been lucky to reach land alive. Fortunately, as her strength failed her, the relentless ocean tides had deposited her on a beach, rather than dragging her out to sea.

She slowly stood up, leaning against the rocks, wringing the sea water from her dress. She had lost her boots to the ocean.

Wherever she was, it was very different to the bleak, rocky island she had left behind. The golden-sand scenery around her could have been cut and pasted straight from a holiday website.

She did know however that, wherever she had ended up, it would most likely be her home for a very long time. She doubted it would be easy for the Doctor to find her, if he even could. He had always implied that the touch of an Angel, casting you decades back in time, was as good as a death sentence. It was therefore quite a surprise, when she came over the rocks, to find herself staring directly at a familiar blue box standing on the beach.

Clara laughed. She should not have been surprised. If she had learnt anything in her travels, it was not to underestimate the Doctor.

She tottered forward, desperate to make it to the safety of the TARDIS. Her heart lifted when the doors opened ahead of her, but sank violently when she saw who emerged. She threw herself down in the long grass that grew along the beach, as she watched the scene unfold, desperately trying to figure out who the people were.

A short woman, wearing a simple Greek dress and carrying a baby, strode out onto the beach. She turned and made a gesture of farewell to a man who lingered in the doorway, before hurrying away across the sand dunes.

The man was young, handsome in a clean-cut kind of way, wearing a suit with an antiquated cut. His side-parted hair was worn in a style she had only ever seen in movies set in the fifties and sixties, but it was his tie that really caught her attention: its distinctive colours and patterns were those of Coal Hill School.

Hesitantly, Clara rose to her feet.

The young man, who had been in the process of turning and going, stopped and stared.

Illustration by Carolyn Edwards

"Hello," he ventured with a bemused frown.

They were both caught off guard by the blast of wind that swirled between them, as a second Police Box warped into existence in mid-air, blasting up a whirlwind of sand as it spun to a halt and settled onto the ground. Its doors opened even before it had fully solidified.

The Doctor exploded out onto the beach, his eyes wild, as he glanced at each of them.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" he shrieked. "Nobody say anything! One word could cause a thousand universe-shattering paradoxes. Clara, into the TARDIS!"

Clara frowned.

"How did you find me?" she asked, unable to stop herself, as she squelched across the sand to the open door.

The Doctor glared at her through crossed eyebrows.

"What is it with you?" he snarled. "Which part of 'shut up' was too complicated? Can't you blindly follow one simple instruction when I yell it at you?"

"No."

"That must be why I like you," he muttered dourly. "But seriously, inside. Now"

"Yes, sir." She gave him a mock salute and her favourite annoyed stare, as she pushed open the TARDIS door.

The young man in the old suit mouthed wordlessly, obviously confused.

"I can see you're obviously confused." The Doctor grinned at him, hand raised in attempt to fend off any questions. "Why not hurry inside and ask the Doctor about it. Huh? He knows all the answers, doesn't he?"

Instead of obeying, the young man stepped forward, his eyes drawn to the lights and gantries of the console room beyond the wooden doors.

"I don't know who you are, or what's going on, but if you can get us back home, to Coal Hill School, then I am prepared to beg for your help."

Clara looked up at the Doctor, noting the brief flicker of regret that crossed his features.

"All right, I lied about the paradoxes; it's just incredibly awkward." He pushed Clara through the door. "Yes, I have a fully functional time machine, but I won't help you. Sorry."

He slammed the door, locking the latch.

He momentarily rested his head against the wood.

"I'm really beginning to see why there are rules against crossing your own timestream," he muttered. "It's just embarrassing."

"If all they want to do is go home, can't you help them?" Clara tried.

The Doctor nodded. "I could, but Ian and Barbara travelled with me for a while yet. I'm not sure what would happen to me without them. They help make me the man I am. It's the very definition of a fixed point: if I changed it, I would be changing myself. Besides, I'm trying to stop someone else from changing my past; I'm not going to make matters worse by doing it to myself. Now, we'd best

get out of here before Ian figures out my previous self's key would unlock the door."

The Doctor hurried down the entrance gantry and quickly threw the TARDIS into flight. He stood back, watching the huge, central column spin.

"And care to explain how you found me?"

The Doctor shrugged, keeping his eyes on the time rotor.

"The Weeping Angels are creatures of the abstract. They'll kill you in the most poetic, symbolic way possible, or snap your neck." He shrugged. "When it threw you back in time, it was almost inevitable that you would run into me on my previous visit. If nothing else, the Angel will feed on the paradox. We were lucky it was at the end of my visit, so your appearance caused only minimal changes to the timeline. Ian saw you, he tells me, I remember, I know exactly where you are, so I come and pick you up. Simple."

"If you say so."

"So where are we going now?"

"Coal Hill School."

"To see the consequences of your tampering with the legend?"

The Doctor shook his head.

"I sorted that." He shrugged. "I still had the Medusa's head from my former self's original endeavour. A paradox to be sure, but one that supports established history, or in this case, mythology. Having spent countless years looking at Angels, it slowly began to petrify. As the wisdom goes, that which holds the image of an Angel, becomes an Angel, gifting the head with the legendary powers it was supposed to possess. Medusa in this timeline survives, but Perseus still claims to have killed her, so a life is saved, but history is unchanged. Job done."

"You must be feeling smugly proud of yourself."

"Well" – he shrugged modestly – "I was awesome."

"If only we all got second chances."

The Doctor nodded.

"Indeed. For now, I'm dropping you back to Coal Hill School. It's time I found out who is responsible for all of this. It's time for me to find my enemy."

"Good for you. You find your enemy. I need to find a towel," she muttered, trudging down one of the stairwells, heading towards the locker where she kept a change of clothes and a towel, as she found it surprising how frequently in their travels she ended up soaking wet.

She paused on the steps and glanced back at the Doctor, not worrying about the sea water that dripped from her clothes, falling into the depths of the TARDIS.

"What happened to the girl from Troy?"

"She died, Clara." The Doctor did not look at her, but kept his eyes on vast time rotor in front of him. "She sacrificed herself to protect me. She was being held hostage, so she opened an airlock directly into space, rather than let me be forced into turning back from my mission. She saved me. Indirectly, she saved billions of lives."

"And yet you never mention her?"

The Doctor turned to face her, his arms spread open in gesture of honesty.

"I barely knew her. Our acquaintance was fleeting."

Clara frowned.

"In your terms, isn't that true for all of us? You've lived for two thousand years – all our lives must seem like mere moments to you. Easily forgotten."

"You're different, Clara." The Doctor bowed his head and turned away, breaking eye contact with her, pretending to focus on the controls. "You're my Impossible Girl."

His words reassured her a little, but she shivered in her wet clothes, suddenly aware that one day her time aboard the TARDIS would be little more than a distant memory. Perhaps she would be forgotten.

She hurried down the steps.

By the time she returned to the console room, they had landed, the time rotor once again still, quietly glowing in gloom. The white wooden doors stood open, revealing the Doctor standing on a grassy hilltop.

In the distance, a crowd was cheering.

"That does not look or sound like Coal Hill School," she observed, stepping out into the world. "For starters, people sound as if they actually want to be here."

The TARDIS had materialized at the top of the valley, the immediate view revealing a long oval arena below them, with thousands of tiered seats cut into the natural incline of hillside. Countless figures, all dressed in the fashion of the ancient Greeks, were crowded into the seats and cheered on a handful of figures that were sprinting the length of the stadium.

"It's most definitely not Coal Hill School," replied the Doctor. "This is just like the old days. Never knowing where or when the doors would open."

"You can get me home though, right?" she asked nervously, remembering the desperate man on the beach begging to be taken home.

"Would it make a difference? Would you not come along if I couldn't guarantee to get you home?"

"No." The answer was out of Clara's mouth before she'd had time to consider it. "I have a life. I like to know where our escapades begin and end. I like to know that I can always go to the safety of my own home!"

"Sounds terribly dull to me." The Doctor shrugged, his eyes clouding with sadness. "But then I guess I too am now on an odyssey to find my home. No longer an aimless wanderer."

"Can you get me home?" Clara pressed her question, noting how the Doctor had avoided answering it.

He shrugged in response.

"Whoever has the Alpha TARDIS has sent us here," he growled. "They decide where we go now. We are no longer masters of our own destiny, but merely pawns for them to move around in a game beyond our comprehension. As ever it was, with gods and men."

"Where are we?" she asked, ignoring his dour, fatalistic attitude, not wanting to acknowledge or encourage it.

“When I stepped through those doors I had no idea!” He grinned manically at her, as he began moving down the slope. “But, as I’m so clever, I figured it out. I’d wager these are the games at Larissa or Argos, and that’s Perseus!”

As he scurried down the slope, the Doctor pointed a hand at a figure standing in the centre of the arena which, while distant, was moving with the same confidence and ease as the swordsman they had encountered on the island at the end of the world.

“Why have we been brought back to him?”

The Doctor stopped abruptly, his feet churning up dust from the dry hillside as he slid to a halt. He glanced around at Clara, his face filled with confusion.

“This is the end of the Perseus legend. He was originally rejected by his grandfather, King Acrisius, because of a prophecy that he would one day kill him. This is the day he completes that destiny. Despite everything that has happened, all the adventures, he turns up here, throws a discus or quoit or something, and kills him purely by accident! The greatest legend humanity has, and it’s rounded off by a reminder that you can’t escape destiny. I was running to save a man that I cannot save.”

“Can’t you try?”

The Doctor shook his head.

“It’s a fixed point, with thousands of witnesses. To undo it would be to change the legend, to change a story at the very root of western civilization.”

They both looked on in horror as the tiny figure in the arena cast an object into the air. The object arced and spun wildly off its intended trajectory, directly into the crowd. The Doctor opened and closed his fists, watching powerlessly as the inevitable happened.

There were screams from the crowd, as a king crumpled to the ground.

The Doctor’s hands flew to his head in despair, then in fury he threw them wide and shrieked at the sky above them.

“Is that what this is?” he cried in rage. “A reminder that I can’t change time? Why would someone go out of their way to remind me of such a soulless, empty doctrine? What’s in it for you? Why show me this?”

The sky did not respond.

The Doctor stormed back into the TARDIS, harrying Clara with him, and slammed the doors on the scene outside. For a moment, Clara thought there were tears in his eyes.

“Am I being taught how powerless I truly am?” he croaked, as he set the TARDIS once more into flight. “I can’t prevent an accidental death. I can’t even promise to get you home.”

He shuddered as the central column sank to a halt. He looked at the doors with trepidation.

“We could be anywhere,” he muttered.

Clara quietly undid the latch on the doors and stepped out into the unknown.

“Coal Hill School,” she informed him, as she gazed around at the familiar desks and whiteboard of her form room. “Surprised?”

“Well, now I think someone is just messing with me.” The Doctor scowled as he stepped out of the TARDIS. “And when I find out who, I’m going to punch them in the face.”

With only the gentlest of clicks, the door to the classroom creaked open.

“Oh dear,” replied a familiar voice, which had become deeper and richer with age. “You know, you’ve really changed. The man I knew would never have said that! I think the worst threat he ever made to anyone was giving them a jolly good smacked bottom.”

The man who stood in the doorway may have been old and thin, with thinning white hair and skin cragged with age, but his eyes were still as bright and alert as they had been when they had parted company on the beach.

“Ian Chesterton,” the Doctor replied in a low whisper. “How long’s it been?”

“Fifty years.” The old man smiled, offering a hand.

“Or a thousand years,” replied the Doctor, shaking the outstretched hand enthusiastically.

“Or about twenty minutes,” added Clara. “If we’re pedantic.”

“Time always was relative,” Ian replied with a shrug. “However you count them, for me, they’ve been good, precious years. I’d all but forgotten those crazy days in the TARDIS, the old noggin not being what it once was. Those days felt like a dream. Then today, some of those memories flooded back. I remembered meeting both of you on a beach. Much to my surprise, as school governor, I recognized one of my teachers.”

The Doctor grinned at him.

“That’s because those events happened today. See, it’s never too late to have one more adventure.”

“I thought I’d see if I could find you, to make sure my staff were safe.” The old man nodded at Clara. “I’d hate to think you were abducting Coal Hill staff again.”

“No, no, no.” The Doctor laughed, shrugging his shoulders with vague embarrassment. “It’s not like that anymore. I bring her home safe and sound after each trip. She thinks she has a life, apparently. I am sorry about that whole abduction thing; I didn’t think I had a choice at the time, but you live and learn.”

Ian smiled, the wrinkles around his eyes deepening.

“Well, I never thought I’d hear you actually apologize. You certainly never used to do that.” He laughed.

“Ha, ha,” replied the Doctor, not quite so amused.

“I guess the old saying is true: it’s never too late to apologize. But equally, we never properly thanked you to your face, for all of those glorious adventures. You may not have taken us home by the direct route, but we got there in the end, and it’s the end that counts.”

The Doctor’s grin froze.

His teeth were clamped together as if he were in physical pain.

He slowly raised his hands to his head and he slapped himself in the face.

“I am the biggest idiot in the entire universe!” he announced loudly, throwing his arms wide and spinning on the spot, much to both Clara and Ian’s

surprise. “I always was a slow learner; evidently I need two teachers to learn one simple lesson! And I was right: this is all about learning a lesson!”

The Doctor leapt at the TARDIS, Clara rapidly falling into step behind him.

“Goodbye, Doctor!” Ian shouted, waving at the back of his preoccupied friend, not expecting a reply. “I’ve had the best lifetime imaginable.”

“Me too!” came the reply as the door closed.

Not pausing for breath, the Doctor dashed towards the console, a smile plastered across his normally dour face. His hands flew across the controls.

“Care to share?” Clara asked, hurrying across the gantry towards him.

“I’ve changed!” the Doctor yelled in delight, as he threw the TARDIS into flight.

“Don’t I know it.”

The Doctor strolled back over to her, still unable to control his unbridled delight.

“When I started out, all those years ago, despite my attempts to take charge, I was never in control. I was a man on the run in a stolen ship. I was an aimless wanderer forever getting out of his depth. I knew so little about the universe, and I hid my ignorance with bluster, but I am not that man anymore.”

Clara raised an eyebrow.

“You’re sure? Because it does sound a hell of a lot like you.”

“That’s because sometimes I still think I am that man! But I’m not! I can pilot the TARDIS now. I can go anywhere I like. I can open the doors with a click of my fingers. I can do things I could never do before. I am not on the run anymore: I am trying to find my people. I, finally, am in control.”

“That’s the lesson?”

“No!”

The TARDIS engines sung out as the ship materialized back into existence.

“I used to believe that time was like a river, that you dare not try and change it, for fear of being swept away. I believed we could not change the end of the story. I was wrong.” He shrugged, his happiness still lifting the deep furrows on his face. “Time is like a river, but you can change its course. A tiny change can alter the entire future. One man can change the entire universe.”

Clara looked warily at her friend.

“You can’t just rewrite history.”

“I can.”

“You don’t have the right.” Clara shook her head, folding her arms.

“I do.” The Doctor let the smile fall from his face, letting his earnestness replace it. “More than that, when things are truly bad, I have a responsibility to act. We all do. Just because things have always been a certain way, does not mean it has to remain so. I have spent too much of my life just reacting to events that were happening, never making plans, not acting with purpose and direction. It’s time that changed. Do you remember what I said just after I regenerated? I’ve made mistakes. It’s time to put them right. I could not save King Acrisius, but there is someone whom I can save. ”

The Doctor moved past Clara and unlatched the main doors, revealing a black abyss littered with stars, in which floated a small, spinning circular vessel.

“Did I ever tell you about the time River Song flung herself out of an airlock, forcing me to come to her rescue?” he asked, his eyes focused on the tiny ship. “This is the same trick. I’ve extended the shields and created an air corridor. I’ve had the ability to do this for years, but I’ve never stopped to do it.”

In the distance, an airlock door opened on the side of the spacecraft, propelling two of its occupants out into space, their tiny bodies silhouetted against the light of the airlock, cartwheeling through the vast expanse of nothing. One of them tumbled directly towards the open doors.

“She was kind. She was innocent. She didn’t even understand what was happening. She deserved to live. She deserves a life, just like Barbara and Ian – just like you.” The Doctor braced himself in the doorway, opening his arms, preparing himself to catch the flailing, screaming woman. “So I choose to save her. I choose to save the girl from Troy. I saw her blown out of an airlock, but who is to say what happened next – who is to say that I wasn’t there!”

He caught Katarina in a full embrace, turning his body so that he struck the floor instead of her, protecting her from the impact.

The girl looked around her with bewildered eyes.

“You are another aspect of Zeus,” she proclaimed, a questioning hesitancy in her voice. The Doctor grinned back at her.

“Perhaps today, I am.”

He carefully extracted himself from her hold, pulling her up onto her feet even as he stepped away.

“Is this the place of perfection?” she asked, examining the glowing central column and the roundels on the wall with curious eyes.

Clara quietly closed the doors.

“No, but as luck would have it, that’s the next stop!” The Doctor beamed as he sent them plunging towards their next destination. “I can take us directly there!”

The engines ground to a halt as he ran across the gantry to the doors.

Grabbing hold of Katarina’s hand, he undid the latch and pushed her outside, forcing her out onto a slab of rock, surrounded on all sides by a churning, violent ocean.

He tried to close the door, but Clara caught his hand.

“What are you doing? You can’t leave her here! You can’t do all that and then abandon her on a rock in the middle the ocean!”

“I can!” The Doctor nodded. “Because we skipped over part of the Perseus legend!”

The Doctor pointed through the narrow crack in the door, to a white horse with broad wings which was rapidly descending towards them. Riding on its back, sitting between its wings, was Perseus.

“Do I even want to know where he got a flying horse?”

“No. It’s very odd. He should be using winged sandals.”

“Because that’s much more sensible?”

The Doctor shrugged. “It’s not important how he gets here. Just that he is here. This is the day he meets Andromeda, with whom he falls in love and marries.”

Out on the rock, Katarina ignored the ocean that spilled over her feet, as she gazed upwards at the hero on his white horse, descending from the clouds.

The Doctor closed the door.

"And they all lived a happily ever after?" Clara asked.

"Well, they're about to be attacked by a sea monster." The Doctor shrugged. "But then, no life is perfect. The important thing is they get to lead long, full lives. At the end of which, their souls are set amongst the stars by the gods."

"So, how many laws of time did you just break?"

"Countless, but I never was one for rules, laws and limitations." He shrugged. "That was the lesson I needed to learn: that I am in control of my own destiny, and it's time I chose my own course."

He turned to face the console, and then quietly pushed forward the dematerialization lever, setting the controls with absolute precision.

"Surely the Alpha TARDIS can just knock us off course again?"

The Doctor shook his head.

"Not this time. Not where I'm going." The Doctor grinned with maniacal daring. "I'm going to land directly on the Alpha TARDIS itself. Someone has gone to a lot of effort to tamper with my past, to teach me lessons, seemingly for my own benefit, so I think it's about time we found out who and why. Don't you? So, are you coming, or should I try to take you back to your all-important life first?"

Clara shrugged. "Well, given that's just marking homework, I may just stay onboard for this one."

The Doctor nodded.

The TARDIS, under the control of its pilot, plunged onwards.

Next Episode
NIGHTLIGHT

Confirmation Bias

by Andrew Blair

At first there was the hiss of distant water and the cries of strange birds in the sky, all bathed in green moonlight. Then there was a noise like creation tearing itself apart, mending, and then tearing again. It repeated as a deep blue box solidified under a flashing light, clunking into place like a bad gear change. A door creaked open and an arm, bent at the elbow and lead by a finger pointing upwards, emerged.

"Ah, but what if it isn't a trap? What then? Of course if it is a trap, there'll probably be someone in peril anyway – lovely word 'peril,' should mean something nicer – so we'll have to rescue them and that is why, Rory Pond, we are answering this distress signal – ah."

The oldest bipedal lifeform in the galaxy followed its finger out of the blue box. It looked like a post-graduate lecturer you were completely ready to hate, but ultimately found yourself warming to. It moved like a marionette operated by people who hated each other, and its ego was worshipped on several planets. It was called the Doctor, and if pressed he'd tell you that it was all just a misunderstanding and he almost certainly wasn't Loki.

"'Ah'? What is 'Ah'? Ah."

A nasally dominated face topped with brown combed-down hair appeared over the Doctor's shoulder.

"I think we're too late," said Rory.

Skeletons of short, prefabricated structures lay smouldering, their innards gutted. Their remains indicated a lengthy street, a linear settlement amidst silhouetted woodland. There were bodies lying across it. They looked human, and wore light-coloured, knee-length khaki shorts and matching shirts. Their faces were masked by kerchiefs. Rifles with opaque chambers lay by their sides or – in one case – melted onto a torso.

"A battle. Down to the last being," said the Doctor.

"Do you think—"

"No…"

The Doctor had spotted something. Outside the third house on the left. Bipedal, yes, human sized… yes. Metallic. Yes.

"No no no nononono."

The Doctor scampered forward. Rory opened his mouth to ask if it was safe, then closed it again because obviously it wasn't safe. It never was. The worst that could happen is that they would die, and frankly Rory had been getting very mixed messages about how long-term that was. He ran after the Doctor, cursing himself for agreeing to Amy's suggestion that he and the Doctor have a male bonding session in her absence.

"You'll love it. Lads lads lads!" she'd cried, before whirling round and departing the TARDIS for a purple-skinned Maroon 5 tribute band whose gigs were simulcast from deserted planets. There were six people in the band. Rory had declined attending because he thought it sounded awful. Now, as his wife

gleefully abandoned him in favour of gimmicky space-pop, he wasn't so sure he'd made the right decision.

"Lads lads lads!" said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "I'm not sure I've done this before. *La*ds. *La-a*ds. What happens? Do we wrestle?"

The Doctor was stooping over the metal bodies now, checking for signs of life. They were Cybermen. Rory recognized some of them, the familiar stocky design, but there were others… variations on the basic design, with varying degrees of sleekness. They all had the weird head-pipe things. Some of them had fragments of human flesh showing through their coverings. The one thing they had in common was that they were still, dead things.

"Why do they look different?"

"Different tribes, different… iterations. They end up scattered, Cybermen, whenever they're defeated. They start again somewhere new and they don't have the resources to replicate precisely. Hence…"

The Doctor gestured at them and stuck his jaw out with a grimace. He picked up a decapitated Cyber-head near his feet and stared at it.

"You don't make SENSE!" he yelled at it. "How can you lot never see it? You don't. Make. Sense!" He rolled the head away in disgust and sighed. "Sometimes I feel sorry for them," the Doctor said. "But less and less often."

Rory had been inside the Cyberfleet, briefly, and knew what he meant. He'd seen the conversion chambers, he'd been to planets where the Cybermen were legends, horror stories used to frighten children, but he also knew that the day-to-day life of a Cyberman was mainly standing, inert, waiting. They only really had something to do when they were about to make planetfall, and that would potentially involve fighting and dying. Again.

In that respect, Rory could relate to them. But then he *could* relate to them, which was in itself a distinction.

"Doctor," he said, "we should look for survivors."

"What?"

"Survivors? There might be some."

"No no no, the Cybermen wouldn't do that. WOULD YOU? EH? Yes. You."

"Doctor?"

"What?"

"You're shouting at dead Cybermen."

"Well they're ANNOYING ME."

Illustration by Paul Cowan

Sometimes it was very hard to believe that the Doctor was feared and adored throughout time and space.

"Okay… but do you think that shouting – really, very loudly – just after a Cyberman attack is that great an idea?"

"…Ah."

"Yes. Ah again. Doctor, I'm scared, none of this is nice. There are a lot of dead people, and these bird noises are really unsettling. If there's anyone left alive, I would like to help them, then get out of here."

The Doctor pondered this.

"Survivors?"

"Yes."

"…Yes. We should. Just… in case."

The Doctor's jaw settled back into its normal, less antagonistic position. He softened and straightened up, and patted Rory on his shoulders.

"Atta-nurse, Rory Pond!"

There was a creak from a house behind them.

It had once been two floors. The internal structure was largely intact, but the walls at the front had melted or disintegrated, leaving only a triangular block around the doorway, reaching up past the upper floor, shrouding the source of the noise. Inside was a mess of wires, jutting from the remains of the walls in a way that reminded Rory of medical diagrams, and debris-covered furniture. A mantelpiece in the right-hand wall supported dusty photo frames. The ceiling buckled unnervingly.

The Doctor and Rory exchanged looks, and then crept in around either side of the triangle. The gravity was similar to Earth, but Rory felt like each footstep was heavier than normal. As he rounded the wall he saw movement, and then realized it was just the Doctor putting his weight onto the first step of a buckled staircase.

"Wait here," he whispered.

Rory opened his mouth to speak. The Doctor placed a finger on it.

"Rory," he said, "I know it's dangerous – and arguably idiotic – to go up there alone, but Amy will kill me if I come back without you, so either way…"

And with one bound he was heading towards potentially violent death.

The Doctor creaked his way up the stairs, delicately placing his feet on the side of the steps and gripping the walls in case the steps gave way. When he neared the top, he hauled himself up over the last few steps and sprung himself onto the landing with surprising grace. He disappeared from view and Rory waited, listening to the faint footfalls and scuff of boots, hoping the noise they'd heard was just some sort of intergalactic stray cat. When the footsteps stopped and silence fell, Rory fought the urge to whisper "Doctor?" for what felt like minutes.

Then there was a noise like a piston, and the Doctor shouted "No no no!" and then the hissing rose, louder footsteps shook the building, and a bass rumble of a voice filtered through the ceiling. A brown blur appeared at the top of the

stairs, and Rory found himself being knocked to the floor as the falling Doctor collided with him. The Doctor recovered quickly and dragged Rory upright.

"Is it—"

"Yes!"

"So we should—"

"Yes!"

"Doc-tor…"

At the top of the steps stood a one-armed Cyberman, its surviving arm stretching down towards them.

Lennox didn't know how tough life was at the time. He was a boy, his parents' only child; there were places to play and his belly was full. As far as he was concerned, Signus Omega was home, and the brief days spent awake on the Ark ship a hazy memory (and apparently he remembered the colours wrong anyway). He was a child of the colony, the generation who would reap the rewards of their parents' toil. All the adults knew this, but kept it from their children for the most part. Those that did know were too young to fully process it.

It wasn't until afterwards that Lennox found out. He thought about it intensely for hours at a time, concentrating on his parents' many sacrifices, and it brought him out in a pleasing melancholy that left him drained and unable to operate for almost a day. Still, though, he felt it should mean something more. He felt their heroism deserved a stronger reaction. Not everyone had made it.

He didn't want to blame Mr. Wallace, now he knew what he'd done.

Signus Omega was a balmy and moist world. The terraforming had made a small settlement bearable, but it was still approaching tropical, and growing food was difficult. It had not been an easy settling-in period. The children had been playing, most of them involved in a thirty-person football match. They kicked a can around, barefoot, or watched on from the sidelines. Creepers and vines made good skipping ropes or climbing frames. Lennox had just been outpaced by Shoshanna Brewster when the message came.

Any speaker that was on broadcast it. Everyone heard the bassy, droning voice repeat itself – apparently without pause for breath – until the original human satellite signals broke through again:

"Humans. Cybermen offer you help."

Some of the children went home when they heard it, finding it upsetting, but most of them just found it annoying and carried on playing. It stopped after a couple of hours anyway, by which time most of them were home and pressing pillows around their ears to block out the noise. It stopped, and then – barring a few nightmares – everyone got on with their lives. School. Play. Mucking around being young. That sort of thing. Cybermen were like dinosaurs: there used to be loads of them, yes, and they could do horrible things to you if you met one, but they were only alive in the past. That message was probably just one of the Earth magnate dynasties trolling the outer colonies. Don't worry about them. They can't hurt you. Just ignore it if it happens again.

More children than parents slept soundly that night. Two days later, something happened that was impossible to ignore.

The spaceships landed in the rainforest.

They'd been picked up in plenty of time, long-distance scanners notifying the senior members of the settlement and giving them time to prepare defences. They had a perpetual siege field in the settlement, and enough time to prepare it. While it couldn't actually last forever, it certainly gave them at least a decade before it became penetrable. Lennox's parents took this news stoically, though they felt it in their guts. Realistically, it would be tough, but they were already doing this for him, not for themselves. Through Lennox, they would survive.

The spaceships landed in the rainforest. They did so quietly, almost unassumingly. They didn't open fire, and legions of Cybermen didn't pour out of them the second they landed. The town went to bed, and when they woke up, they were surrounded.

The Cybermen were standing motionless and silent around the circumference of the force field as the colonists were assembled in the main street, to be informed and educated as to their situation. Life would continue as normally as possible, they said, but it was hard to pay attention to what was said when always, out of the corner of your eye, the suggestion of their outlines, their impassive faces, was present.

As night fell, the Cybermen became shadows and silhouettes, still standing in formation, encircling them. When they disappeared into the dark of night, small circles of light emanated from their chests and picked out details of their armour. The force field's presence resulted in a slight hum, but it felt like it was coming from the figures at its perimeter.

Few had so little curiosity as to restrain themselves from looking, and those who didn't got out of their beds when the chant began.

It sounded like a communal, outspoken prayer, but with a hint of iron, a metallic buzz. Lennox didn't understand it fully until later, but it was, of course, an advert:

Humans.

Cybermen offer you help.

Cybermen offer you a life without pain or disease.

Cybermen offer you solidarity.

Cybermen offer you the end of all your struggles.

Let us in.

You belong with us.

You can be like us.

This would continue with no clear pattern. It could be intoned on a loop for hours or minutes, or said once in the midst of great silence, but there was no suggestion of logic underlying its frequency. It was hard to sleep through, when it came at night. The lack of sleep and the presence of something other – these sleek and covetable vampires – combined with further rationing made the time pass in a dreamlike haze.

This was the first time Lennox became aware that the colony was fragile. His own body became a constant reminder. Fewer and fewer people were playing football – nobody had the energy. The streets felt empty. It was like someone was lowering a fader on the colony, leaving only the channel playing the constant hum of the force field and the erratic pleas of their visitors. Perhaps it was all a dream. Perhaps the colony and all these memories were just what it felt like before you were real.

There was an old woman in the colony. Sometimes she would talk to Lennox about whether he was enjoying life here, how it was quite an adventure for the kids, and how it was a different sort of adventure for the two of them. Her husband stood by her at all times, relaxed and smiling, but silent. The only time he talked was when she started – for no obvious reason, it seemed to Lennox – to scream and rant and yell. Then he would talk, he would ask her to stop, plead with her, ignore her striking him, wait until she was calm, and then lead her home.

Lennox knew it wasn't totally his fault.

He knew better than anyone that, if you were told a condition was incurable, you would take any chance to prove it otherwise.

One night her husband had made a decision. After making sure that she was asleep, he had left their house and approached the invaders. He'd offered them a deal, which they had accepted.

A few people awoke when the humming stopped. They got out of bed, looked out of their windows and saw this man walking calmly towards the Cybermen, who stood completely still in their unbroken circle. He'd told them the force field had been deactivated, and that he knew several people who were interested in their offer.

A Cyberman with darker markings on his head gestured forward. One of the creatures stepped forward into the area that force field had covered. Then, as one, the entire circle advanced a single step and uttered the words:

"*You will be like us.*"

An arm shot forward, a red light flickered and the husband fell back to the ground. A Cyberman began to drag him away as the rest of them advanced.

Lennox was woken by his mother. His father stood at his bedroom door holding a rifle, his eyes constantly shifting back down the stairs. He could hear shouts and screams outside, strange electronic noises.

"Lennox, you stay in this bed, okay?" his mum said. "Whatever happens, you stay in this bed. Don't let anyone into the room. This is a fort, okay? You protect it. You protect it against anyone who tries to come in."

"What if it's you?"

"Even if it's me," she said eventually.

She hugged him. He remembered the smell of her sweat, the peel of his skin against hers. Then she stood, and he noticed for the first time she had a pistol tucked into her belt. His parents stood at his bedroom door, prolonging the moment. He didn't quite understand what it meant at the time, as his mother turned away, and his dad reached over to the door panel and activated the security shutters. The last he saw of his parents was his mum cocking her gun

and his dad looking back at him as the shutters fell. He was alone in a dark room, the light blocked off at his door and windows.

Lennox screamed. He wanted them to come back; he didn't understand why they'd left him, what was happening, what the noises were outside. The intercom buzzed and he heard his dad whispering at him to calm down, please, calm down. He sounded anything but calm himself. Then Mum said, "They're here." Dad said, "Lennox, stay in there," and the line went dead.

Before he had time to scream again, Lennox heard the buzzing, droning voices from downstairs through his shielded doorway. There was a pause, then he heard the muffled rumble of speech once again. Then an abrupt gunshot, ricochet and whine of dying frequency in Lennox's ears.

The sound faded, and the silence stretched on until it became physically uncomfortable before Cybermen spoke again; the lowest bass rumble, a single syllable that was overwhelmed by the sound of laser fire, followed by a brief bout of automated rifle fire. Bullets ricocheted off metal and embedded themselves in the walls. Two brief, precise blips of noise brought the gunfire to an end, and then there was silence.

Lennox said nothing, but his body shook. Sometimes what you can't see is worse than what you can. He waited, and hoped that the guns would start up again, but they never did. Heavy, regular footsteps approached his door, coming to a halt outside. Lennox gulped, his breath whined in his nose, but he kept his mouth closed. If he opened it, he thought, he would never stop crying. His teeth were clenched tight, causing a loose molar to wobble.

The door shuddered under impact; the sudden clanging echo caused Lennox to gasp and forced his loose tooth free. The shielded door didn't seem to be giving in, but it made such a noise as it was repeatedly struck from outside. Lennox heard a droning noise in his ears as the last impact rang out, followed by footsteps heading back down the stairs.

Lennox sat up in bed.

Had they left him? Was he safe? Why had they given up so easily? Was the door really that much of a problem for them? He waited, not wanting to get out of bed until he was sure they'd left the house. The sound of footsteps faded and then disappeared. Lennox relaxed. He was safe here. His parents had locked him up in a castle, impregnable.

How long could he stay here before it was safe to come out though? Would the monsters ever actually go away? What would he find once they'd left?

Lennox sat on his bed, his eye twitching as he tried to maintain silent composure. When the hands punched through his bedroom floor and started dragging the bed down, though, Lennox screamed. He didn't stop screaming as he leapt off his bed, deactivated the security shutters and launched himself from his window into the chaos of the street.

Houses were aflame, discarded weapons lay in doorways and Cybermen were dragging limp bodies out of their homes. Lennox landed badly, breaking his right leg. His scream faded for a second before coming back, rejuvenated. The noise alerted an unburdened Cyberman, who changed direction and headed purposefully towards Lennox. He tried to drag himself away, but the pain was

too great. He felt hands dig in under his shoulders, a blur of movement, and heard a voice saying "Halt." There was a flash of red and the sound of a falling body.

Amidst the confusion and immense pain, it took Lennox a few seconds to realize he'd been picked up by a woman, who had hoisted him up over her shoulder. Behind them, a man lay stunned against the wall of Lennox's house: the Cyberman electing to collect his body rather than pursue them. The woman swore and told Lennox to shut up, but carried on running. She didn't stop till they were out of town and lost amidst the trees, whereupon she unceremoniously dumped Lennox against a trunk, squatted down with her hands on her knees and breathed. Phlegm rasped in her throat, and she spat and wretched, then shuddered and sobbed.

Lennox looked over at her. He'd seen her before; he remembered the red hair, but didn't know her name. He thought, perhaps, he should ask, but then the pain in his leg overwhelmed all other sensation, and he began to whimper again. He tried to restrain himself, but all his previous agonies seemed like nothing in comparison to his present. After failing to stifle a particularly loud moan, his rescuer snapped her head up and glared at him.

"Stop it," she said, almost gritting her teeth. "Just *stop*."

Whatever expression crossed Lennox's face at that point, it softened her.

"Look, I'm sorry," she said. "But we've got to stay quiet, okay?"

He nodded, but the effort of not crying out made him weep; his mouth opened to wail, but no sound came out.

"Hey. Come on. We'll get through this, okay? We'll survive."

"…m' leg," said Lennox, after concentrating so hard he almost blacked out.

"What's wrong with it? Here, let me look."

When she touched his leg, he screamed. He clamped his mouth shut, cutting it off, and looked pleadingly up at his rescuer. She was looking around wildly, in case the noise had attracted anyone. There was a blur of movement from under the foliage. Lennox pressed himself up against the tree and bit his lip, but the footsteps were too soft and rapid to be a Cyberman. A teenage girl ducked under the low-lying branches and halted in surprise upon seeing them. She bounced on her feet, not fully stopping, a word building up inside her, but unable to be released due to sheer pressure.

"Run!" she screamed, and as she sprang forward, a short red beam caught her in the back. She ran a few more steps and then crumpled forward, her open eyes facing Lennox as he attempted to somehow climb backward, under the bark of the tree to some sort of safety.

His rescuer turned and dithered, not sure which way to run. She looked down at Lennox – terrified, damaged and barely able to stop himself from screaming. She weighed up her options.

"Sorry," she said at last, before running off into the forest.

Lennox stopped trying to hold the screams in. He called for someone to come back, to help him, please. It wasn't a coherent plea. He tilted his head back and curved his spine around the tree, looking for someone in the forest. He

screamed until a shadow fell across him; a metal hand reached out and he was shocked into unconsciousness.

The first task for the recent conversions was to round up the remaining viable organics and process them. Other Cyber Units were dispatched in small shuttles to extricate metals and minerals. Wildlife was utilized fully, no parts of the animals were wasted: within a body there was energy, vital fluids that benefitted mechanized parts, and in some cases the bodies could become Cybermats. Planets could be stripped of resources within the year, but they were never left completely dead. For technologically advanced creatures, they left some sort of ineffable imprint on the worlds they devoured – something other, something that sapped energy from the very universe itself. Nothing could explain it, and anyone who tried ended up falling victim to it themselves. It was like an infection.

There were cells of resistance, however. There always were.

Cybermen did not consider the reasons for this, merely the methods by which they could overcome it. They were creatures constrained by logic. When they located, through heat signatures, a large concentration of viable organic life forms, they examined the situation ruthlessly. The life forms were gathered at the peak of a foothill with the advantage of height over the forest paths. The terrain meant it was impossible to advance quickly, which left the Cybermen the option of coming in over the mountains. That way they would be advancing from above, using surprise rather than speed. The time taken to traverse this route would also increase the likelihood of willing conversion, as organics succumbed to hunger and exhaustion.

Logic is, however, merely a case of picking the best option. The best option still has problems. And so it came to pass that the Cybermen advanced without detection, right until they came to a narrow pathway leading down towards the foothills, in sight of the organics. On one side of the path was a steep incline headed by bare bushes, on the other a long drop onto boulder-strewn patches of grass.

The gunshots were fired high over the unit's heads, signalling awareness of their presence. They also signalled a sudden increase in vibrations as boulders tumbled down the slope, gaining inertia as they approached the unit, crushing the plants on the top of the slope. Evasive maneuvers were taken but for seven units this was not sufficient, and they were knocked over the edge. The impact of the boulders – then the ground, and then the boulders again – was enough to destroy all bar one of these Cybermen.

The body that used to be called Lennox Charnley received a series of queries and commands, ascertaining the amount of damage he had sustained, and the probability of rescue and restoration. After a few milliseconds, the unit was informed that it was most likely going to deactivate due to the combination of inaccessible location and the level of damage. The sound of battle drifted down from high above. Other units would be able to retrieve and convert the organics. This was within the parameters of acceptable losses.

The Cyberman remained still as it died. It wasn't even waiting, merely on standby for further instructions that it was never going to get.

It was silent to begin with.

Then its components began to deactivate.

A faint electronic gurgle built and built, until it turned into a full-blooded screaming fit, and the Cyberman started to twitch.

The emotional inhibitor had stopped working.

Lennox Charnley was alive.

He thought nothing at first. The pain blazed through him, as if he was being scalded from within. So much felt wrong. He could *feel* his organs, but they weren't in the right places. It made him feel sick, and he spat a cold, milky fluid from the slit on his face. His vision swam, streams of information swept across it. He tried blinking and couldn't. Then he could see so clearly, his vision so sharp, and hear, and smell, and…

Lennox blacked out. It was too much to cope with.

When he regained consciousness, the pain was down to a pulsing ache that seemed to shift rapidly through his body by the millisecond. There was a message in his brain. It appeared as sound and words: *Life-support systems deactivating in ten seconds.*

It was down to six before Lennox processed what was happening.

"No!" he shouted, and then he heard his own voice. He felt the ghost of wincing, tried it again and realized he couldn't. He tried raising his head, but failed. Instead, he saw the words:

Life-support systems online. Systems damaged.

There were screeds of text beneath that, followed by a command prompt and the query: *Restore damaged systems?*

"Yes?"

System restore unavailable. Try again?

"Yes."

System restore unavailable. Try again?

"Yes!"

He tried breathing deeply. Something rattled in his chest. He tried raising his head again, and this time he briefly succeeded before it almost immediately became too painful to continue.

His body was definitely metal.

He remembered the woman running, and a hand reaching out towards him, and then this. There was something else though. He knew there must be. He felt it in his memory. His mind's eye started witnessing events in reverse: the hillside tumbling past in a shower of boulders, the march over hill and mountain, leaving the mothership, and then moving deeper, backward into its depths—

He screamed.

There are some things that no one is ever meant to see.

Lennox lay still for a while, in shock, a low moan coming from his throat. He wanted to kick and thrash, but he couldn't. He wanted his parents. He

wanted to be hugged until he felt warm again. He wanted to wake up, back in his bed—

Another memory resurfaced.

No, not his bed.

His parents weren't coming back.

Despair gutted him. His body ached and burned. His body wasn't his body. No one was coming to help him. The little movement he'd achieved so far was pointless. He was going to die here, monstrous and alone. He was already dead. If there was anybody watching, they wouldn't know the difference.

We will survive.

The memory flashed briefly and faintly. Lennox willed it back. Nothing. He mentally slumped backward again.

We will survive.

He caught it this time, held it in place through force of will. He questioned the words, and data streamed into his mind, too much to bear. He screamed and wailed, and felt his limbs twitching. Screeds of history, of victories uncelebrated, of losses merely acknowledged. Of an ascent towards the ultimate goal curtailed by irrational logic, fear and desperation. Of splintering, of divergence, of struggle and of barely existing. Hiding and running. And all through this, the driving force behind every action, the founding premise of an entire race:

We will survive.

And now he saw it all: weakness and might, logic and madness. Lennox Charnley. Or what was left of him. His mind slowed, his brain ceased teeming. He concentrated.

We will survive.

And Lennox lifted up his head.

Lennox had never been a good climber, but now he had fingers stronger than his old arms, and thousands of years of momentum driving him on to escape. There were times when he hung there, waiting to process or recharge, for hours. A true Cyberman would have waited until it was ready, but then a true Cyberman would be dead, and Lennox was impatient. By the time he reached the path, night had fallen, but he found his vision switching automatically. He could hear from the forest – and he seemed able to focus his hearing quite specifically – sounds of laser fire, of running and of screaming.

He needed help. He headed towards them.

On the edge of the forest, he heard a scream that didn't sound too far away, and followed the noise, using the trees as cover. He saw a Cyberman advancing, arm outstretched, towards a woman who was shrinking back against a tree, fear overcoming her. Lennox recognized her. He wished he didn't.

It was at this point Lennox realized he was very, very angry.

These creatures had turned him into one of them; they'd taken his parents, they'd taken his whole life away from him, but didn't even care. They were doing it for the same reason that a TV turns on when you press the power

button. Lennox's thoughts translated into a small stubby tube flicking outwards from his arm, ready for use. He knew what it was, what it was for.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Just stop!"

The Cyberman halted and turned its head to witness the newcomer, only to have it blasted off by laser fire. Lennox kept shooting at its body until he was told his power packs were depleting, at which point he slumped down to his knees and started pummeling the body with his fists. He kept going until it stopped hurting.

He became aware of movement behind him. The woman was hesitating, unsure whether to investigate or to run for her life.

"It's you, isn't it?" he said. The red-haired woman started to back away, but Lennox rose quickly, and she found herself back against the tree as Lennox pointed at her, unaware of how it looked.

"Please," she said, "just kill me."

"I don't understand," said Lennox. "Why did you run?"

"What?"

"Why did you run?" he said again. He felt like he was sobbing, but the noise sounded wrong. "You left me. Look what they did to me."

"Oh my God."

"Look what they did to me. Why did you run?"

"Oh my God."

She had run because she wanted to live. Her mind didn't feel made up when she started running, and it didn't feel made up afterwards. That thought was there, behind the immediate desire for safety, as she now made her way through the forests behind the knight in shining armour she had made for herself.

His leg was broken – they would never have made it. She'd tried to explain, but couldn't, partly out of guilt, partly because there was no sign of comprehension. It had taken a lot of hushed explaining to calm him. He became, essentially, her avatar, as if it were a voice-controlled, first-person shooter. If they met any Cybermen, she had pretended she was being taken for conversion, and he would shoot them. Occasionally, as they walked, he emitted a strange noise, like someone pressing down strings of a bass guitar.

It took her a while to realize it was sobbing. It was this that convinced the first person they met he wasn't dangerous, and that she wasn't mad. When Lennox destroyed a Cyberman that was dragging away an unconscious man, that was further proof. When they found their way to the remaining survivors and Lennox told them everything, this was enough for most. Those who remained suspicious waited until night. Lennox found he didn't fall asleep, but he could enter a sort of standby mode, so he found himself awake and screaming for help more quickly than his assailants were expecting.

That he screamed for help convinced any remaining doubters.

The Cybermen tried once more to convert them, but this time there were few losses. Months went by, and the vibrations and sounds of heavy machinery abated. The remaining colonists returned to their settlement and tried to rebuild.

But not too much. Keep things low key, small scale, lest they merely invite the return of their attackers. They repaired their houses, the communications – Earth was contacted for help – and they did their best for Lennox.

In the intervening years until an aid drop from Earth arrived, Lennox tried and failed to fit in. He was tall and powerful, a protector of the settlement. He was now a teenage boy. Instead of parents, he had a committee. He experienced the highs of a first crush – a gentle hand on the back of his – alongside the interception of Mardok communications and being deployed as a defensive weapon. He had his heart broken, examined his internal mechanics and system specs, borrowed equipment and data from the tech team, and tried to fix himself. He had the option not to be hurt. It was more than tempting, but to get to that point of his body and soul, things would have to get a lot worse before they got better.

Lennox was fifteen when the aid ship arrived. Packages of equipment and food arrived, along with a military shuttle carrying an officer – green shirt, knee-length shorts, jutting powerful chin – and a scientist (dressed as a scientist). They came into the classroom, and asked – rather needlessly – "Is Lennox Charnley here?"

This was greeted with blank faces, especially by Lennox. For once, his emotional state matched his external appearance. He was taken aside, asked how he was, how he felt physically. He answered in socially acceptable, non-committal ways. They nodded and smiled politely, then glanced awkwardly at each other.

"Lennox," said the officer, eventually, "how would you like to get your parents back?"

The Cybermen were gaining in strength and numbers. Historically, that was how it always seemed to go. They went away. They became bogeymen, myth. All they needed was one survivor, though, and from there they would build a new race. When they seemed to be too powerful for humanity to overcome, they vanished. And always accompanying this, stories of a man in a blue box. A dashing, childlike boffin, some stories said, or a clown who played spoons and card tricks like he was in a variety hall rather than an army camp. This strange, silly man, reports said, had managed to overcome the Cybermen by means of ingenuity, luck, talented friends and doing what nobody else could do. He was a pacifist with the blood of millions on his hands. He preached an absolute morality; he justified his means by their ends. He played honky tonk piano in bars and could drink an unimaginable amount of ginger beer.

He didn't make sense. The universe mainly let him get away with it, because it didn't make sense either. He was known as the Doctor.

He was unreliable.

Turning up in the nick of time was all very dramatic, but it did ramp up the body count somewhat. This time they wanted to try a different approach.

Lennox.

If they could replicate what had happened to Lennox, the Cybermen would not be the same threat they once were. And Lennox would agree to this, because it was the only chance he had of finding his parents again.

The Cyberships that had left Signus Omega had been tracked. And Lennox would have, for want of a better word, an alibi. The officer was willing to go with him as his prisoner, a potential convert. He was willing to be converted, he said, because he was confident that he would be reborn in a new body, that Lennox would save him. And his parents.

After all, he added, what sort of life did Lennox have here?

The main thing Lennox thought as he watched the officer's conversion was "I'm not ready for this."

There had been weeks of training. Lennox didn't get physically tired, and they had worked him hard until he'd mastered the gait, the speech patterns. He had to be unemotional, fast thinking and logical. Now there was a screaming man, not dying exactly, but not being kept in a state anyone would call living.

Lennox had asked him if he was ill or dying. No. Not at all. This was apparently what he wanted. He trusted Lennox. And the tech guys. Sure, there was a risk it would fail (and what would they test it on?), but there was a backup plan for that. He assumed his presence at the conversion was unnecessary and headed down into the depths of the ship. In its central column's lower levels, thousands of Cybermen were stored cryogenically.

No one stopped him entering: he wasn't deemed a threat. No one stopped him from setting a section to slowly thaw, although a unit would probably be despatched. Lennox had enough time to activate his new, built-in disruptor. It had been designed to replicate the damage done to Lennox's hardware, in the hope that his condition could be duplicated in other Cybermen. He started at the highest level of storage, working methodically downwards and setting the thawing process timer to allow a slow build up of sensation, but also to allow the newly emotional Cybermen to block the path of anything sent to investigate.

From the floors above, he heard the sound of screaming, collapsing bodies and echoing metal. Some people were not surviving the process. Lennox paused for a moment to consider what that might mean for him, but then walked onwards into the bowels of the ship, sticking to his task. He heard laser fire now, but couldn't tell if it was returned. He remembered how he felt when he awoke in this body, how afraid they must be, but also how that fear drove him to reacting without thinking. He could have just sent hundreds of people to their deaths, scared and confused, or he could have saved them.

But being a Cyberman wasn't an experience. He only remembered it after, feeling nothing at the time. It was like rescuing them from sleep. There were times when sleeping forever felt like a good plan. Not death, just a lack of awareness. He could see how that might be tempting to a soldier.

"Lennox Charnley."

The voice came from the ceiling, from a speaker grille.

"Lennox Charnley, what is it you want?"

A Cyberman's voice, perhaps, but deeper. Older.

"Who are you?" Lennox asked.

"I am the Controller. I was one of the first."

"The first?… How old are you?"

"I am four-and-a-half billion years old."

"That's impossible!"

"It is necessary. Lennox Charnley, what is it you want?"

"I want my parents… a family. A normal life."

"A normal life is chaotic. Painful. Brief. Let us repair you."

"No!"

"You will survive."

"I'll survive anyway."

"No. You will decay and become nothing. Your armour will seek a new host. The logical choice is to let us repair you."

"Don't talk to me about logic. You left me to die! You left me to die because it was logical."

"It was logical."

"And how's that working out for you? Hmm? Here I am!"

"Your plan is unlikely to succeed."

"Yeah. You wouldn't ever have tried it would you?"

"No. We would endanger our survival. Organic lifeforms die where they might live."

"And you don't?"

There was no reply.

"If being logical is so great, how come you *always* lose? How come you're always sent back to skulk in small tribes? How come you *evolve* different tribes? How come that man… that insane man… he's organic. He's the least rational sounding person I've ever heard of. And you *always. Lose. To him.*"

There was no reply.

"If you're being *really logical*," continued Lennox, "you'd realize that being logical *doesn't make any sense*."

There was no reply.

Lennox waited, and then carried on with his task.

They had taken the ship and fled the fleet.

There had been about a hundred of them left. These were the ones who had survived both battles for control. Lennox didn't know what had happened to his parents. No one else from Signus Omega was on this ship, but nonetheless they headed back there. It was somewhere Lennox knew they could defend. Last time they were tired and had no effective weaponry. This time they had Cybermen on their side.

Besides, where else was there?

They had tried making planetfall elsewhere, explaining that they came in peace, but the sight of a Cyber Warship on approach made people understandably nervous. They could land somewhere uninhabited, but then what

long-term future did they have? What purpose? Somewhere they could get help, regroup, and who would believe Lennox if he said they came in peace. That's what was needed, and really there had been only one logical choice.

The fact that it was logical worried Lennox. He was hoping that they wouldn't be tracked, but knew it was unlikely. He was hoping they could defend the settlement, but wasn't totally sure. There were no good options, but at least here was some semblance of home. Not a family, per se, but people who looked out for him. A crumb of comfort. Some hope to cling to.

That hope dissipated when Lennox walked into the force field.

The settlers didn't mind one Cyberman, they explained, but not this many. For three days, Lennox walked from the ship to the settlement and asked them to change their minds. They refused each time. On the fourth day, as Lennox reached the settlement, the ship blasted off without him. Lennox was allowed back in. He was home. He was with people he knew.

The Cyberfleet arrived the next day, in such numbers that one Cyberman couldn't possibly be enough. They needed help. Lennox asked for it, using all he knew to send a message out into the stars, but it was too late.

The colonists of Sigma Omega were captured, converted, or killed. Lennox knew then that he was finally going to die. He found his old bedroom in the ruins of the settlement, and remembered that night when everything had gone wrong. He'd lost an arm, his voice box was damaged, and his systems were shutting down one by one, but it didn't hurt now. It didn't feel painful at all.

Maybe it was his hardware re-asserting itself. Maybe it was just age.

Then a strange noise reverberated around the town. Something uncanny yet hopeful. Something frightening, stupid and wonderful. He recognized that noise. He'd never heard it before, but it was stored in the Cybermen's memory banks, a sign chaos was afoot.

The Doctor.

The Doctor could help him. The Doctor could help *everyone*. Once he found out what Lennox was…

There was still hope.

At the top of the steps, a limping, one-armed Cyberman stood, its surviving arm stretching down towards them. It took a slow and uncertain step forward.

The Doctor pointed his sonic screwdriver below its feet and wished. A high-pitched noise filled the air, and the wood of the top step cracked just as the metal-clad foot came down. The Cyberman fell through the step and pitched forward, landing headfirst on the ground where the Doctor had been standing. Rory had pushed him out of the way.

Illustration by Paul Cowan

The Cyberman lay face down on the floor, emitting a low groaning sound. Rory helped the Doctor up, and they both stared at the broken creature.

"Can we help it?" asked Rory.

"In a way," said the Doctor. He knelt down and patted the Cyberman's head gently. It struggled futilely, too damaged to fight him off.

"Sssh. It's going to be okay."

The Doctor held his sonic against the back of the neck, closed his eyes and activated it. The groaning lowered in volume.

"What are you doing?"

"De-activating it. Painlessly as possible. If it's groaning, it probably means the emotional inhibitor is damaged…"

The Cyberman twitched, its noise momentarily rising again, before it settled again and became quiet and still.

"There."

The Doctor stood and pocketed the sonic while staring at the Cyberman. Rory waited for him to stop, rather than break his concentration, only for the Doctor to continue brooding over the body for longer than he found comfortable.

"Could we have done something for it?"

"Mmmm?" The Doctor raised his head. "Yes. Yes. No. No, we couldn't. While there's life there's hope, I suppose, but is that life? I've often wondered… I don't know if there is any hope in there. I don't know. I don't think so. I want there to be but… well… the Cybermen were a mistake. A colossal, huge, seismic mistake. One that the universe will be dealing with for a long time."

"We all make mistakes," said Rory.

The Doctor stared at the Cyberman again.

"But not like this," he said. "I don't think there's hope for them."

Circular Logic

by Stuart Roth

"Ian, I really don't think we should be wandering off like this," Barbara Wright said as they entered another corridor in the seemingly endless TARDIS.

"Because the Doctor tells us not to?" Ian Chesterton was normally a reserved fellow. In all the time he and Barbara had worked together as teachers at Coal Hill School, she had never seen him raise his voice – that was until they met the enigmatic Doctor and began their unexpected journey through time and space.

"We have no idea what powers this ship. What about radioactivity or some such thing?"

Ian turned around sharply. The corridor ahead branched off into three directions. "Listen, finding out as much as we can about this machine of his is the only hope we have of returning home."

"Find out more about my TARDIS indeed!" The voice came from hidden speakers around the corridor. "Snooping! That is what I would call it." An old man stepped out from one of the halls. "Nosing into things that are not your concern." The man was a good four inches shorter than young Ian. Despite his shock of long white hair and his age-worn face, the old man seemed a match for the angry school teacher. Sharp-as-tack eyes stared up at Ian. "Explain yourself, young man."

"Us explain! There is nothing to explain. You either can't or you refuse to take us home. We've been through enough, with cavemen and Daleks; what more do we have to face? Oh no, Doctor, we're taking matters into our own hands now."

The old man considered this for a moment and then chuckled. In that mumbling little voice he used while talking to himself, he added, "Take matters into their own hands, will they?" He chuckled again. "Yes, that would be something to see now, wouldn't it? But no, I won't tolerate interlopers in my ship." He looked up, encompassing both Ian and Barbara. "I won't have you wandering about, unattended, and free to do damage and to get yourselves into mischief." They were about to protest. "That is my final word on the matter."

Ian let out a little laugh of his own. "I don't think that you know how to operate this machine of yours. I think you're just fumbling about in the dark. What other reason could there be for you not to take us back?"

Barbara sensed what Ian was up to. The Doctor was egotistical; maybe the insult would kick him into finally taking them home. Oh how she missed the sound of that morning bell and the noise of pupils in the hall. What if Ian was correct: what if the Doctor truly didn't have any way of returning them to Earth? He was forgetful and doddering.

"What impudence!" The Doctor's face went a funny color. He paced a moment before looking back at the young man. "You, Chesterburg, are impudent! I've forgotten more knowledge in my time than you are capable of understanding—"

“Then surely someone with all that knowledge is capable of taking this machine back to London.”

The Doctor wagged a finger in preparation for a good tongue lashing, when a thin smile crossed his lips. “I see that there is no arguing with you,” he conceded. “No reasoning with you – determined to have your own way. So be it then. Prove me wrong. Go back to your little fact-finding expedition.”

Ian blinked back at him. This wasn’t the response he was expecting.

The old man leaned around him. “But do not go down that corridor over there.” The hallway extended for ten metres before splitting off into a fork. “You are free to roam anywhere you like, except down there. I forbid it.”

“Why?” Barbara asked. “Is there something dangerous there?”

“No, no, nothing at all. Nothing there could possibly interest you.” He turned and began to stroll away.

Ian and Barbara exchanged curious looks. “He’s left us back where we started.”

“Not quite,” Ian said. “He’s given us a place to start.”

“Surely you don’t mean the corridor?”

“Why not? He obviously doesn’t want us to go down there.”

“Did you consider that he might be tricking us?” Barbara had already witnessed how the Doctor was willing to lie and cajole to get his own way.

“No, Barbara, you give him too much credit. We caught him off guard. I think my remark about not being able to fly this ship was closer to the mark than we thought. Come on, let’s have a look.”

The old man entered the console room. A girl of about fourteen was sprawled on the floor reading Chinese manuscript they had picked up from Kublai Khan. Susan looked up and recognized the mischief on his face. “Oh, Grandfather, you haven’t been arguing with Mr. Chesterton and Miss Wright, have you?”

“No child, not exactly arguing.” He patted her on the head and began busying himself at the control console.

She frowned. “Tell me what you’ve done.”

“Just taught our schoolteachers a lesson, child.” He laughed, but stopped when he saw her concerned expression. “Don’t worry, Susan my dear, they won’t come to any harm. I’m becoming rather fond of them in my own way – just a bit, mind you. Nonetheless, I will not have them running amok in my ship.”

She carefully put a bookmark at the place where she had stopped reading. “Please, Grandfather, tell me where they are.”

Ian, with Barbara close behind, made his way down the corridor. The roundels, circular backlit holes in the wall, were darker down this hallway. Barbara also noticed that her ears were popping, much as they would on a plane flight. The whole atmosphere seemed odd.

“Which way now?” she asked as they came to the fork in the passage. Both hallways curved away from each other and receded into the distance.

“I don’t know, shall we try flipping a coin?”

Barbara looked down both passageways and then pointed to the right. “That way.”

“Women’s intuition?” he chided. She returned a patronizing look. This may well be the 1960s, but with some things Ian was still trapped in the past. “Wait here while I check it out.”

“Hold on—”

“Barbara! You’re the one who was so worried about potential danger. Stay here, I’ll have a peek and be right back.”

She scowled, but nodded. “Go ahead then, but be quick.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He walked down the right-hand corridor. Barbara watched him disappear around the bend. No sooner had his shadow passed out of sight than Ian re-appeared from the left-hand corridor.

“H-how did you get there so quickly?” she asked.

He looked confused.

“You were just there – then, then you were here. Did you run or something?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Barbara.” Shrugging, he smiled and walked back into the right-hand corridor, obviously prepared to show her that nothing strange had happened.

This time his back hadn’t yet disappeared in the right passage before the front of him came around the left-hand bend. Barbara saw two Ians for a split second.

“It seems to have doubled back,” Ian said. “Just one big circle.”

“You can’t tell me you didn’t notice anything strange this time. Ian, you were just now over there.”

“Back up, Barbara. ‘This time’ – what did you mean by that?”

“You came around the first time and…”

“And what?” But he was interrupted by the sound of his own voice. “It was different this time around,” a second Chesterton said as he sprinted out from the left-hand corridor. Both Ians fell silent and stared at each other.

“Who the devil are you?” they said at the exact same time and with the exact same tone of irritation. Then, in unison, they turned on Barbara. “Who is this? What just happened?”

“Stop it! Stop it!” Barbara clutched her head.

“I’m going to find out what is going on here,” the first Ian said… or at least Barbara assumed that it was the “first” Ian who had spoken. He ran back down the right-hand corridor.

The second Ian paused, contemplated the fact that he was just about to say the same thing, then added, “Wait here, Barbara,” before sprinting after his doppelganger.

She could only watch helplessly as first one Ian and then the second re-appeared from the left-hand passage. No one had time to speak this time, because a third and then a fourth Ian Chesterton suddenly appeared.

“Good Lord, Ian! What are we going to do? This is some sort of crazy mimeograph.”

The Ians pondered each other for a moment, then looked imploringly at Barbara, but apparently none of them had anything to say.

Several seconds passed before slow, self-satisfied laughter was heard.

“So, I see that your fact-finding expedition was productive.” The Doctor appeared with his walking stick and a broad smile on his face. “I trust that you were able to double your knowledge, hmm?”

Susan ran up beside him and burst out in laughter before catching herself and forcing a straight face. “Grandfather, you’re so mean.”

The Ians took a step forward, duplicate anger on their faces.

The first Chesterton took the lead: “All right, Doctor, how do we put things right again?”

“Put things right, would you, Chesterfield? I think you already have. Determined to have your way and to bully me about in my own ship – now you have the numbers to do so quite efficiently.”

Ian clenched his fists and looked up at the ceiling. Barbara wondered if he was going to strike the old man. “Doctor, why do you play these games?” she pleaded.

“Games, my dear? This is not a game. The TARDIS is something beyond your comprehension. That is the way of things. How to explain? Would you, a reasonable, intelligent woman, allow a child to play with your kitchen stove?”

“Of course not.”

“Then would you let that child play with a nuclear power plant? No, of course you wouldn’t. That is why I had to teach Chesterstan a lesson.”

Susan tried to mediate: “Earthlings really are one of our favourite species, but sometimes you can be quite primitive.” That didn’t help matters. “Only because you live in a very young time for your…” That was only making it worse.

“Now, now, Susan, I think they are beginning to see the point.”

“Yes, we won’t wander off again,” Barbara conceded. “Will we, Ian?”

Two of the men nodded, a third refused to speak and the fourth mumbled a positive response.

“Good then, that’s settled. There are many dangers associated with time travel. I would explain them to you, but the maths becomes quite troublesome. What you have experienced is related to the operation of the time rotor. Time is like a flowing river. In order to travel along that river, one must compress the flow of time. The time rotor compresses and concentrates time into a coiled spring, making it possible for the ship to jump from ring to ring of the coil.”

Susan fidgeted and then interrupted: “You passed through the energy and it hiccupped you.”

“Hush, child, I am telling the story,” the Doctor chided. “As Susan explained, you were hiccupped, duplicated, if you will. Each time you passed through the potential energy field, you brought back one of your future selves. Mind you, if you had not been protected by the temporal grace of these walls, the raw energy of the time vortex would have destroyed you instantly and

totally." Even the old man seemed to be in awe of the powerful forces behind his time ship.

"To rectify all of this," the Doctor continued, "that Ian over there is from your future." He gesticulated with his walking stick to the lead Ian. "Only a couple of moments into your future, mind you, but from your future nonetheless. Those other two are also from your future. Each of you now occupy our present ring on the time coil and are moving parallel to each other. This is something that would never be permitted by the laws of time outside of the TARDIS. Do you understand?"

"No, not exactly. All I care about is getting things back to the way they were."

"Are you sure?" A wry smile slipped over the old man's lips. "I find talking to myself very relaxing at times." He chuckled in that irritating way of his. "No misunderstandings, no having to explain things over and over again."

"I find having just one of me to be good enough, Doctor," Ian answered. "Tell me how to reverse this."

"Use your brain, dear boy." The Doctor tapped his walking stick in sudden frustration. "You entered the right-hand corridor in order to get into this mess, correct?" He made a circular motion with his stick. Then he reversed the motion. "To undo it, you must travel the other way. This will thin out your numbers."

"It is truly like a coil, Mr. Chesterton," Susan added. "If you go one direction, you travel forward in time; travel the opposite direction and you go back again."

Ian sighed. "I have to admit that I'm out of my element." He turned away to avoid the Doctor's gloating expression. Barbara passed him a supportive smile. "Come on, boys, let's give it a try," Ian said to his fellow Chestertons. All four copies entered the left-hand corridor.

After a moment two Ians returned. The Doctor waved them around with his cane. They re-entered the corridor, and at last only one Ian Chesterton returned. He patted himself down to make sure he was real. "I can be the bigger man here, Doctor. I admit that I was wrong, but you have to acknowledge our wish to return home." Barbara reached out and took his hand. They looked at the Doctor and Susan.

"Why Chesterton, I've never refused to accept that. No, indeed it is always on my mind…" He trailed off as some sudden thought drew away his attention. "Come along, Susan, I want to have a look at that book we picked up."

The girl fell in step beside him. "Which book, Grandfather?"

"That one, child, you know the one…" They disappeared around the corner.

Barbara took hold of Ian's arm. Surprisingly, he didn't seem angry. "Do you think he'll ever get us home, Ian?"

"I have no idea. For now, there isn't much we can do but – enjoy the ride."

"Enjoy isn't exactly the word I would use."

"Experience, then," he added with a smile. "We shall experience the ride together."

Mixed Signals

by David Black

A sea of static washed over the screen. Two words appeared over the fuzzy void and announced "Signal Lost." Security Camera 45 was either malfunctioning or possibly missing altogether. The screen faded to black and then again static. Security Camera 46 was equally faulty, another "Signal Lost." Again the screen went blank, before being replaced by an image of a green and lush hillside bathed in sunlight. No one was watching the feed from the cameras and so this beautiful landscape went unnoticed. Security Camera 47 had not only survived, but was providing a picture that would have been the envy of many an art gallery wall.

The image was altered for a split second with the addition of a tall blue box. It disappeared and reappeared a couple of times before it became a permanent fixture in the vista. Due to the gradient of the hill, it stood at an odd angle and cast a long shadow.

On the other side of the hill, hundreds of bodies lay scattered in what had once been an agricultural zone. They were a mass of contorted shapes, all with bared teeth, pockmarked skin, torn clothing and vacant stares. At first glance, they might not have appeared human at all and perhaps they no longer were, but each had a remnant of an earlier life. Some wore wedding rings, others ID cards. From over the hill, a faint wheezing, groaning sound came and went on the breeze. One of the prone bodies began to stir. The movement caused another prone form to stand, and another, and another until some sort of grotesque Mexican wave had worked its way across the entire group. As one, they lumbered up the hill in search of the cause of the noise.

Nyssa stepped out of the TARDIS and was immediately greeted by an incline ahead of her. The transition from the orientation of the time machine to the slope of the hill caused her to walk with a slightly awkward gait until she got used to it. She wore a sandy-coloured hat atop a brown velvet ensemble. She stopped and looked around her. She decided that she would get a better view from the top of the hill and began to climb.

The doors opened again and a tall man with fair hair followed her out. He didn't struggle with the change in perspective as Nyssa had. He stood for a moment in the sunshine with his arms outstretched. He soon made short work of the hill, quite literally taking it in his stride and was quickly at Nyssa's side.

"Doctor?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Where are we?"

"Oh, Nyssa. Does it matter? Let's just enjoy it for the moment."

She felt the hat lift off her head and turned to see him putting it on.

“It is lovely,” she agreed, closing her eyes.

They stood silently listening as a slight breeze filtered through the trees.

“Right, that’ll do,” said the Doctor.

Nyssa opened her eyes and discovered that her companion had gone. She turned to see him bounding down the hillside.

“Where are you going?” she called after him.

“Thisaway!”

She sighed and made her way to follow him.

The figure at the edge of the group crested the top of the hill; behind it, hundreds more climbed ever onwards. The sight of the incongruous blue Police Box didn’t interest it, nor did the view that spread out below. It was searching for one thing: movement. If it moves you can eat it. Below the tree line, two shapes strode down the hillside in blissful ignorance of what lay above them.

“Why this way?” Nyssa asked.

“Civilization,” offered the Doctor.

“How do you know?”

“Plumbing.”

“Plumbing?”

“Well, pipes anyhow. Where there are pipes, there are buildings, and where there are buildings, there are people.”

“Where are there pipes?”

The Doctor stopped and pointed at a thin green line that ran along the grassy bank. Nyssa hadn’t noticed it before, but now it seemed obvious.

Hundreds of bloodshot eyes focused wildly on the ground below as they searched for signs of movement. The top of the hill was now covered with unwieldy individuals. Behind them, a seething mass of other bodies inched its way upwards as hundreds more were clambering over each other to reach the summit.

They walked around the bank, and Nyssa saw that the green pipe did indeed lead to a building. It was a simply decorated squat tower with round walls and a spherical object at the top.

“What is it?” she asked, before answering her own question: “Some sort of observatory?”

“Exactly!” the Doctor agreed.

Between the observatory and any potential visitors stood a large metal fence. It appeared to have been haphazardly constructed from pieces of metal repurposed from somewhere else. Upon closer inspection, Nyssa could make out

doors, ladders and parts of chairs, hastily welded into a barrier which, despite its chaotic appearance, was solid to the touch.

The Doctor ran a finger along the edge of a large octagonal panel that spanned the height of the fence.

"This is the roof section for a prefabricated building. It's definitely human in origin. An Earth colony?" he suggested.

"They don't want anybody getting in," Nyssa said.

"They don't want anybody *else* getting in," the Doctor corrected.

"How do you know it's not empty?"

"Don't look now, but you're on camera."

Nyssa looked up. There was indeed a camera trained on her and another following the Doctor as he moved along the fence.

"Which part of 'Don't look now' didn't you understand?"

"Sorry, I couldn't help it."

The Doctor carried on walking around the fence, his fingers probing its myriad pieces. He stopped at just above ground level, at a jagged piece of metal that was attached to what could have been a locker door on its side.

"Now, the cameras could be automatic, of course," he continued, "but something about the way they move makes me doubt that. If there is anyone watching us, maybe it's time to give them something to see."

He twisted the jagged section and the locker door fell open freely. The Doctor pushed it inwards and gestured to Nyssa to go through.

She squeezed through and stood on the other side of the fence. She dusted herself off and stared up at the observatory again. The Doctor coughed pointedly. Nyssa turned to see he was still holding the door open expectantly. She lifted the door and waited as the Doctor crawled through.

"I'm not sure I've ever entered a building through the cat flap before," said the Doctor.

It wasn't a phrase Nyssa recognized. As she considered it, she absentmindedly let go of the "cat flap" and the door swung closed with a loud slam.

A metallic clang rang out, and a torrent of twisted ungainly shapes flowed over the crest of the hill. It was as if a river of people had burst through a dam and wound its way down the hillside. As they ran down, many tripped and fell and were covered by a wave of others climbing over them. Hundreds upon hundreds of them wended their way through the picturesque landscape and round towards the observatory. The flow subsided, and the once green and lush hillside was now a churned-up muddy quagmire. A handful of human forms lifted themselves out of the mud and continued walking or crawling towards the source of the noise.

The Doctor was examining the walls of the observatory when he heard the first sounds signalling that they weren't alone. He turned to see a dozen or so

slavering humanoid forms round the corner and run at full pelt towards the fence. He watched as they ran straight into the barrier, sparing no thought for any injury they might suffer. Nyssa winced at the noise their bodies made as they hit the fence. She saw the Doctor stand on tiptoe. Over the heads of the first few, he could see wave after wave joining them, boosting their ranks.

The small gaps in the fence were now filled. All Nyssa could see was reaching fingers and desperate staring eyes, until there was a movement by her foot. She looked down and realized that the creatures had discovered the cat flap. She grabbed the inner handle and attempted to push it closed. The pressure from the other side was too much for her and some filthy arms forced their way through. The Doctor rushed to her side and sat down. He placed his feet on the door and began pushing it closed. Nyssa hit out at the anonymous probing arms, pushing them back through the hatch. The Doctor closed it and stood up. As they both backed away, they bumped into something solid. They turned around to discover three people stood in the now open observatory doorway.

Nyssa was standing very close to a woman in a purple uniform. She couldn't identify it specifically, but she had been travelling with the Doctor long enough to interpret the signs: padded shoulders, shiny symbols on the chest and lines on the sleeve. She was in her early fifties, with very pale blue eyes and dark brown hair with a streak of grey. She was also carrying a gun, which she used to knock Nyssa backward into the fence. Nyssa felt fingers touching her arms and pulling her hair. She let out a shriek. The Doctor came to her aid and attempted to free her from the filthy, grasping digits.

"Are they infected?" asked the woman.

"Nah," responded the shorter of the two men.

"Is that a diagnosis, McCall?"

"Sorry. Let's do the test."

"All right, since it was your idea, McCall, you go first."

McCall's face screwed up and his eyes went skyward.

"Quickly, Mr. McCall!" ordered the woman.

"I'm thinking," McCall replied, the frustration evident in his voice.

"Very well, Mr. Hopper, what have you got?"

Hopper, the taller of the two men leant forward and, with a slightly embarrassed tone, said "Who wrote *The Dictionary of Revenge*?"

"Oh, that's a good one," said the woman.

"What?" said the Doctor in disbelief.

Hopper repeated his question. The Doctor stared incredulously at the trio and was surprised to discover they were serious.

"Malbecca?" he offered.

"Who?" said the woman.

"Oh, perhaps she hasn't been born yet."

Having prised herself off the fence, Nyssa gave the Doctor a withering glance.

"I've got one," said McCall. "Which song by Gold Wednesday is named after a sign of the Veltranic zodiac?"

"I don't think I know that," said the woman.

Nyssa could see from the blank expression on the Doctor's face that he had no idea. She thought about the signs of Traken's zodiac and chose one that didn't seem too specific to her world.

"Water?" said Nyssa.

"No," said McCall disparagingly.

Nyssa looked back at the mass of bodies at the fence. They were wedged in tight enough that some were managing to climb up and were in reach of the top of the fence.

"How many legs does a Diasophorus have?"

"Oh, oh I know this one," said the Doctor. "Think. Think. It's an odd number. The newborns run in circles in the springtime."

"That's not an answer," said McCall.

"Eleven!"

"Correct. In you come," said the woman.

The inside of the observatory was dimly lit. The walls were dark grey with a purple stripe three quarters of the way up. It was the same shade of purple as the uniforms worn by the three people who had just welcomed them inside.

"What was that all about?" asked the Doctor.

"The test?" said McCall. "That was to check that you weren't infected."

"Infected?"

"You know, to check that you weren't a zombie."

There was a moment of silence as everyone reflected on that last word.

McCall sighed and continued: "Anyway, it turns out you are just rubbish at trivia questions."

"Well, you can't have everything," said the Doctor, before introducing himself and Nyssa.

The woman stepped forward. "I'm Captain Traci Valdez. This is Hopper, our medic, and McCall; he's a technician."

McCall stepped forward and crouched slightly as he asked, "Is that celery? It is! He's wearing celery."

"Hello. Hello. It's been so long since we've seen anybody new," said Hopper, ignoring him.

"The people outside, what happened to them?" asked the Doctor.

Hopper looked to Valdez, who finally asked, "You don't know?"

"Not yet," said the Doctor.

"Does no one else care about the celery?" said McCall, interrupting.

Valdez ignored him. "The scanner detected three heartbeats, and I only count the two of you. Where's your friend?"

"Oh, that's me," said the Doctor. "And me."

Hopper aimed a scanner at the Doctor's chest and nodded to his superior.

"Not human? And you?" said Valdez as she turned to Nyssa, who shook her head. "Maybe that explains it. Maybe you're immune."

"But immune to what?" asked the Doctor.

"McCall named it 'the Wrath,' but that's just because he has too much time on his hands," said Valdez.

"I hate celery. It's mostly water," said McCall, interrupting again.

"So are you," replied the Doctor, before turning back to the Captain.

Valdez walked the length of the corridor and said, "Well, if you're going to eat our food, you've got to earn it. If you're going to earn it, you've got to know your way around."

Valdez could see the Doctor had more to ask, but wasn't ready to answer him. "The questions can wait, Doctor. Mr. Hopper, we'd better find a couple more plates in the stores, some bedding as well. Mr. McCall, give these two a tour of the facility."

"Yes, sir!" both men barked in unison.

"I'll be in my office if you need me," Valdez said, departing.

McCall drew himself up to his full height. "Well, if you'll follow me. It's not much, but it's ours. I like to call this the west wing. Of course, we don't have an east wing, but it's aspirational."

Nyssa and the Doctor followed him. Hopper sighed.

Traci Valdez sat down at the bank of screens in her office and typed into a keypad. The static and outdoor scenes were immediately replaced with indoor views of the rooms and corridors of the observatory. She watched as McCall, Nyssa and the Doctor worked their way around the facility. McCall was gesturing wildly. Always talking with his hands that man, she thought. The girl, Nyssa, was continually looking around, taking in her new surroundings, while the Doctor was clearly intent on asking McCall questions. Valdez pushed another button on the keypad, and the speakers blurted into life.

"So, how come you don't know what's been going on?" asked McCall, his voice distorted by the audio equipment.

"Well, we've only just arrived," the Doctor answered.

"Where did you crash? We didn't pick you up on the scanners."

"Crash?"

"Well, you wouldn't come here on purpose."

The Doctor was about to answer, but Nyssa interrupted him: "The Doctor's a little embarrassed about it."

"Oh don't be. It's quite common here. This whole solar system is a navigational nightmare," said McCall.

"What is the name of this planet?" asked Nyssa.

"Crikey! How far off course were you?" said McCall, slapping the Doctor on the back.

The Doctor smiled a very thin smile and then looked at Nyssa with a definite narrowing of the eyes.

"This is Bantrak," McCall continued, "and this observatory is on the outskirts of Colony One."

They disappeared from one screen and reappeared on another.

Nyssa walked into a room with two long tables and three chairs spread out between them. Along the far wall was a stack of chairs as tall as she was.

"This is the dining area."

"You were saying," prompted the Doctor.

"Oh yes, well it came out of nowhere. Month ago, there were these little outbreaks of madness."

"Madness?" asked Nyssa.

"Colony Two was first. I was there at the time, visiting from Four." McCall pointed to a stylized "Colony 4" logo on the arm of his uniform. "I got back to Four, just in time for another outbreak to start there, so I ran. I found myself at Colony Seven; why else would anyone want to go there?" he laughed.

"I wouldn't know," said the Doctor

"No, I don't suppose you would. Anyway, by the time I'd made it here, the madness had too and shortly afterwards it went global."

Nyssa crossed the room to an arch and walked through to the next room.

"Kitchen and storeroom," McCall announced

"So how many of you are left?" asked Nyssa.

Hopper stepped out of the storeroom and said, "As far as we know, just the three of us. We've heard nothing from the outside world for weeks." He was carrying a stack of boxes in his hands with his medical scanner wedged under his chin. "Two times knife and spork, plate, bowl, cup and hand sterilizer unit."

"Thank you," said Nyssa.

"Yes, very hospitable," added the Doctor.

Hopper attempted to walk around them, and the boxes in the middle of the stack slipped. Nyssa quickly leapt to his rescue and steadied them.

"Can I help you with those?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, okay. Thanks," said Hopper.

Nyssa took the top few boxes from Hopper and handed them to a very surprised Doctor.

Valdez watched as McCall and Hopper departed one screen in opposite directions leaving the two newcomers alone. She rolled her eyes. Security was not their strong suit.

Nyssa was about to leave when the Doctor blocked her way with the boxes. She stopped and asked, "What is it?"

"Why did you tell them we'd crashed?"

"I didn't – I told them you'd crashed."

"Very well."

"It was what he wanted to hear."

Traci Valdez jumped out of her seat, grabbed her gun off the desk and ran out of the office.

McCall returned to the kitchen. “Oh, there you are. I was wondering where you’d got to.”

“Sorry. I was just helping the Doctor with his boxes,” Nyssa lied.

She turned and was relieved that the Doctor wasn’t still in earshot.

“At the end of this corridor is the transmitter room.”

As Nyssa walked through the door, she saw dozens of computer terminals and screens lining the walls. McCall stood in the centre of the room before a table with a translucent green top.

“We barely use it now, but it can still do a few interesting tricks.”

He pressed a button on the edge of the tabletop and a large green “Colony 1” logo appeared in mid-air.

“A projector,” Nyssa said, a little less impressed than McCall would have preferred.

“That’s right, but it can do this.” He tapped a few more buttons and the logo was replaced by a rotating green planet with its land masses all rendered in the same hue.

“Bantrak?” Nyssa asked.

“That’s right.”

McCall pressed another button and seven large dots appeared across the planet’s surface, each accompanied by a loud beep. The dots morphed into cities with buildings, towers and landing areas. Lines connected the cities, depicting a mass transit system.

“Which one are we?”

McCall pressed a button and the projection zoomed in on the largest of the cities.

“There’s Colony One.”

The map zoomed in even further until Nyssa could make out the observatory itself, its fence and the surrounding horde of zombies.

“It’s real time,” McCall said. “If you look closely you can see them moving about.”

Nyssa didn’t look closely. Her gaze was focussed on a tiny but unmistakable green Police Box on the hillside.

The Doctor and Hopper had reached their destination. It was a small room with two beds, two lockers and two lamps.

“So, Mr. Hopper—”

“Craig,” he replied, arranging the boxes into two neat piles at the foot of each of the lockers.

“Craig. How long since you last heard from home?”

“Oh, it sometimes seems like years. I got a vidcall from my sister on my birthday, which was almost six months ago.”

“So, it’s been just the three of you for six months.”

“No, Ben – Ben McCall, arrived a little after we lost offworld communications. He tried to fix the transmitter, but nothing doing I guess.”

Hopper crossed to one of the beds and began making it.

“Hospital corners?” asked the Doctor.

“I don’t know what that is, but it doesn’t sound pleasant.”

The Doctor laughed. He stopped at the sight of Valdez in the doorway, gun trained on him.

“Get behind me, Mr. Hopper.”

“Yes, sir,” said Hopper, tentatively.

He filed out of the room and into the corridor; his confused face peered over the Captain’s shoulder.

“Should I put my hands up?” asked the Doctor.

“I don’t care what you do with them,” said Valdez. “You lied to us, Doctor, and I mean to find out why.”

McCall was disappointed. Nyssa seemed to have lost interest in the real-time projector and was instead looking at the other machines in the room.

“What do these do?” she asked.

“Not much. This half of the room was designed to map solar systems, to scan for possible colony sites, mining opportunities, that sort of thing.”

Nyssa looked over to where he was gesturing. The computers were sitting waiting for instructions, but they weren’t actively doing anything.

“But the ones you’re standing next to are for communications,” McCall said.

She looked down at a screen and read aloud, “Status: continual transmission,” before turning to McCall. “What are you transmitting?”

Captain Valdez took another gun off her belt and handed it to Hopper, who, despite his discomfort, aimed it at the Doctor.

Valdez said, “You told us that you had crashed.”

The Doctor looked slightly perplexed.

“Told you? Oh, you were listening in. The whole place is wired for eavesdropping, I take it.”

“It is?!” said an astonished Hopper, his aim wavering a little.

“Mr. Hopper, contain yourself,” said Valdez.

Hopper apologized and returned to targeting the Doctor.

“Yes, I heard every word,” she continued. “If you didn’t crash, I want to know why you came here. I want to know why you broke quarantine.”

“We didn’t break anything,” said the Doctor.

“We have been broadcasting a warning that this planet is strictly off-limits to anyone in range. If you’d crashed, you might not have heard it, but to have chosen to land here, you must have simply ignored it.”

“We didn’t pick up any transmissions of any sort. Landing a stone’s throw from a transmitter this size, my TARDIS would definitely have picked up your signal,” the Doctor said. “But I tell you, there was absolutely nothing.”

“So you won’t be rescued?” Nyssa asked.

“That’s what quarantine means,” answered McCall. “The Captain doesn’t want to take the risk of spreading this thing to other planets.”

McCall sat on the edge of the projection table, which distorted the image. Nyssa tried not to get distracted.

“Maybe she’s right, or maybe there’s someone out there who can fix this.”

“Maybe there’s someone in here who can fix this,” said Nyssa.

“Sorry?”

“Oh, nothing.”

The Doctor suddenly fell into the room.

“Hello, Nyssa, enjoying the tour?” he asked, adopting a kneeling position.

McCall looked stunned.

Captain Valdez entered the room with Hopper in tow. “Hands where I can see them,” she said to Nyssa as she grabbed a chair and sat to face the Doctor. Valdez noticed McCall’s confusion: “It transpires that these two didn’t crash here, but that they came here on purpose.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said the Doctor.

“But you maintain there was no quarantine signal.”

“Categorically.”

Valdez turned the chair back to face the computer and pressed a button on the keypad. Her voice filled the room as a recording played: “Warning. This planet has been placed under quarantine and access is strictly forbidden. Warning. This planet has bee—”

She silenced the recording at the press of a button.

The Doctor stood up, and Hopper raised his gun hesitantly. The Doctor stared at the screen in front of the Captain. “And this is supposed to be broadcasting on all frequencies?”

“On all frequencies and in all available languages,” she replied.

“And yet, it can’t be.”

“Doctor, this is pathetic. The logs are here for all to see.” She pressed another button on the keypad. The Doctor studied the information that appeared on the screen.

“If this information were true, we would definitely have received this in the TARDIS. I tell you this transmission never left this room.”

Nyssa looked over at Hopper and then at McCall; both were watching the Doctor intently. Then something drew her attention. Over McCall’s shoulder, Nyssa could still see the projection. She watched as an army of tiny green zombies broke through the fence and swarmed the main door.

“Captain, I think we have a bigger problem,” she said with surprising calm.

Valdez directed a scowl towards Nyssa, but her face went pale as she caught sight of the projection. The zombies at the front of the pack were penned in and those at the back were climbing over them.

“Will the doors hold?” asked the Doctor.

“I don’t know, but I’m more worried about that,” said Valdez, indicating the window over the main door. “Hopper, with me. We’ll barricade the main door

and attend to the second floor window." She turned to McCall. "You guard these two." She and Hopper left the room.

"Nyssa, stay here," the Doctor said, as he looked briefly at McCall, then headed after the Captain and Hopper. McCall made no effort the stop him. Nyssa crossed the room to get a better view of the projection table.

"Well," said McCall, "this is awkward."

Valdez watched as Hopper carried a large crate down the corridor and regretted not picking it up herself. She was all too aware of the noise made by the unwieldy table she was dragging along the floor. Suddenly, she felt the load lighten considerably and the table fell silent. She glanced over her shoulder to see the Doctor carrying the other end of the table.

"I thought I told you to – oh, never mind."

"You're welcome," said the Doctor.

Once at the door, she studied it intently, looking for signs of stress. She was relieved to discover that there were none.

The three of them made short work of fortifying the door, and Valdez directed the other two to a ladder set into the wall. Hopper climbed first, then the Doctor at the Captain's insistence. When she joined them at the top, Hopper was already emptying crates and handing them to the Doctor.

"Good work, Hopper," she said.

She clambered from the ladder and onto the hexagonal floor. It occurred to her that this part of the observatory jutted out over the main door. She wondered just how many zombies were beneath her.

The Doctor was piling the crates and boxes up in front of the window as the glass smashed and an arm came through. A filthy hand grabbed the Doctor's shoulder and pulled.

Nyssa gasped as a little green Doctor emerged from the window, hauled out by the zombie at the top of the pile.

"Oh, no!" said McCall.

"I can't watch," said Nyssa, without turning away.

The little green rendering of the Doctor was pulled back inside by another pair of arms, but one of the zombies was drawn in as well.

Nyssa wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not.

"Fall back!" yelled Valdez.

Hopper didn't need telling twice, and he was bounding down the ladder two or three rungs at a time. Valdez soon followed with the Doctor bringing up the rear. He had climbed down about halfway, when it occurred to him that no one was following him. He paused on the ladder.

The Captain shouted, "Come on Doctor! We haven't got time for this."

The Doctor began climbing up the ladder again.

"Wrong way, Doctor!" said Hopper at the top of his lungs.

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" said Valdez.

"Well, you've come this far, Doctor," he said to himself as he reached the top. He peaked over the edge. The zombie that had been pulled inside lay on the hexagonal floor. The Doctor could see no movement. He could still hear the groans of the zombies outside, but nothing more immediate.

Moving slowly, he climbed up off the ladder, approached the motionless figure and nudged it with his toe. Nothing happened. Feeling distinctly braver, he crouched down next to it and felt for a pulse.

"I'm not sure if your heart was beating before, but it certainly isn't now."

McCall was talking. A lot. Mostly about himself. Nyssa decided that as he liked the sound of his own voice, she would let him talk. She sat down at the computer transmitting the quarantine message and glanced at the screen. Steering with her feet, she wheeled her chair around to the next machine. It appeared to monitor power consumption. She wheeled to the next one, pushing another chair out of the way. It was running something called "Program 1." She looked over at McCall. He was still talking, something about his siblings. He was using the projection table's keypad to zoom out. The observatory grew smaller and smaller, before it became indistinguishable among the landscape.

Nyssa reached for the keypad and selected "Define Program Parameters." The screen changed. The columns of numbers told her everything she needed to know about Program 1. She looked back at the first computer, prominently displaying its transmission data. Much of the same data was on the screen in front of her now. Program 1 was transmitting.

Nyssa checked on McCall; he had zoomed out until he could see the entire planet, and then further. The planet was joined by others, and soon the entire solar system was displayed. She reached for the keypad, but snatched back her hand as the edge of the table exploded in a blast of sparks.

She looked at McCall. He looked back, gun in hand.

Valdez and Hopper waited at the bottom of the ladder and were both visibly relieved to see the Doctor return. As he descended, the Captain berated him for his stupidity.

"You can court martial me later," he said, reaching the bottom. "For some reason this building is safe."

"What do you mean, safe?" asked Valdez.

"The zombie that was pulled in after me is dead. Or rather deader. It climbed in through the window and promptly died on the spot."

"What?"

"It's true. This observatory of yours is the safest place on the planet."

The three of them heard the gunshot.

“What is Program One?” Nyssa asked through gritted teeth.

“Never you mind,” answered McCall before erupting in laughter. Nyssa didn’t know what was supposed to be funny.

Captain Valdez appeared in the doorway, followed by the Doctor and Hopper.

“What is going on here, Mr. McCall?”

McCall maintained his gaze of Nyssa. “I caught her trying to sabotage the transmitter.”

“What?”

“She’s running some sort of program.”

“It’s a lie,” said Nyssa.

The Doctor stepped around Valdez and produced a pair of spectacles from his jacket pocket. Putting them on, he looked over Nyssa’s shoulder at the computer screen.

“Oh, now this is very interesting.”

“What is?” asked Valdez.

The Doctor turned to face her. “There’s your transmission, Captain, but it’s not a quarantine warning and it’s not audio.”

“It’s not what?”

The Doctor pointed at a column of ever-changing digits.

“You see these numbers here?”

“I do, but for all I understand them, they might as well be hieroglyphics.”

“They correspond to human brainwaves,” the Doctor explained. “This signal has been transmitted directly into the minds of every man, woman and child on this planet.”

“Why did she do it?” asked McCall.

“Nyssa is capable of a great many things, but this? No. This all started long before we arrived.”

“We only have your word for that,” McCall said quickly.

The Doctor walked around the back of the projection table. “True, but by your own admission you were present at the first occurrence, and the second and the third.”

Valdez leveled her gun at McCall.

“And then you came here – an enormous transmitter capable of spreading this affliction far and wide, even into a planetary orbit; but crucially, a building that was insulated by a field designed to nullify the effect of superluminal transmissions.”

Hopper looked puzzled.

“It’s the reason why, when those poor creatures finally got what they wanted, when they got inside, it killed them. You chose this place, because you knew you would be safe inside. And then in your pride you named it, you called it ‘the Wrath.’ Well, Mr. McCall, I name you.”

“Why?” Valdez whispered.

McCall drew himself up to his full height and took a deep breath. “Because I could. Because I worked and worked and never got any credit for it. Because

when I realized that, with a little tweak, the transmitted signals could be received by the brain, I knew it had to be done. I had to prove it could be done."

"No, you really didn't," said the Captain.

McCall ignored her. "I travelled to Colony Two to experiment with a mobile transmitter, and it worked. It wasn't perfect, but it worked. But there was no gratitude when I saved the colonists from a zombie attack. It was the same with my hometown and again at Colony Seven. But I'd heard about this place. With this place, I could take a localized phenomenon and put it on the world's stage. I could have an army of zombies that were mine."

"What would you want with an army?" asked Nyssa.

"To do my bidding. My bidding wasn't being done."

"In case you hadn't noticed, they're hardly compliant," said the Doctor.

"Well," he sighed, "I was working on that."

"Mr. McCall, lower your weapon," ordered Valdez.

"No."

Valdez pulled her trigger and shot McCall in the hand. He screamed in pain and swapped the gun to his other hand. McCall threw it at her clumsily as he fled the room. He missed and it clattered to the floor.

"Should we go after him?" Hopper asked.

"What would be the point?" said Valdez.

McCall ran down the corridor as fast as he could. When he reached the main door, he fought his way through the table blockade. Undoing the latch, the door swung inwards, and McCall fell backward as the zombie horde tumbled through the opening. McCall stood and struggled out into the daylight. He was surrounded by zombies. Hands clamped around his legs and dragged him down to the ground.

"No, it's me!" he screamed.

The mood in the transmitter room was sombre. It was Nyssa who finally broke the silence.

"So what happens if we cut the signal?" she asked.

"Well, without the signal, they would revert to their natural state," the Doctor answered.

Valdez smiled. She looked at the Doctor. "Everything would go back to normal?"

The Doctor took a sharp intake of breath. "Well, it depends on your definition of normal. I don't want to get your hopes up."

Nyssa twisted her chair around to face the computer. She picked up the keypad and selected "End Program." Her finger hovered over the button.

"All I need to know, Doctor, is that there is a way to fix this," said the Captain.

The Doctor took off his spectacles and replied, "Captain, the people of this planet are gone, and there is no way to put them back the way they were."

"You're saying they won't be themselves."

"I'm saying they died. They have some motor function, but no personality, nothing that made them who they were."

McCall crawled forward through the mass of writhing bodies and got to his feet once more outside. He managed four steps before his mind was ripped apart. No life flashing before his eyes, no profound last words. His very being dissipated. His mind was gone, and his body became a growling, slavering vacant soldier in an army with no general.

The discussion between the Doctor and Valdez continued. Nyssa caught Hopper's eye. He looked down at the keypad in her hand and then met her gaze again. He bit his bottom lip and nodded.

Nyssa pressed the button. Behind her, hundreds of little green figures fell to the floor of the projection.

Outside, the zombie army fell like puppets with their strings cut. Hundreds of anonymous corpses littered the ground. Nyssa put the keypad down and sat back in her chair.

Valdez screamed, "No! They're dead. They're all dead."

"I know," said Nyssa.

"What? You know?!"

"The Doctor said they were already dead. Program One was the only thing keeping them moving. Surely, it's better this way. Would you have preferred to live your whole life trapped? Aren't they better off this way?"

"That wasn't your decision to make."

"Maybe not, but I made it."

Valdez sat on a computer chair and buried her head in her hands.

The walk back to the TARDIS was a quiet one. The Doctor didn't say anything until the time machine was in sight. "I offered Valdez and Hopper a lift home, but the Captain wasn't interested."

Nyssa nodded.

"She was most insistent."

"I heard."

The Doctor produced a key from his back pocket and opened the TARDIS door. He gestured for Nyssa to enter in a manner which reminded her of the observatory's cat flap.

"After you," she said.

Hopper watched the Doctor and Nyssa walk across the projection of the hillside and step into a green cubicle. It disappeared, reappeared and disappeared again.

“I checked the scan, sir. They were only here for forty-five minutes,” he said.

“Three-quarters of an hour later and the world is over,” said Valdez.

She picked up a keypad and began to type. She held it to her mouth and pressed a button to record.

“Mayday, this is an SOS. This is Captain Traci Valdez, one of only two survivors on the planet Bantrak, coordinates attached. We are requesting emergency evacuation.”

They Keep Killing Daniel Harley

by John Anderson

I stepped down the stone steps of the office's main entrance and out into warm afternoon sunshine, which always improved my general disposition. It was easy for the world outside to pass by without a second thought from inside, insulated from the low growl of buses and the cawing of the gulls. Occasionally, the high-pitched squeals of school kids momentarily might catch my attention, but in the main, the worlds on either side of the office window rarely bisected.

Until the end of another nine to five. I lightly jogged across the road outside, not caring to wait for the green man to light up, then round the corner onto the high street, where I encountered the throng of commuters, in some places three and four deep as they all waited for busses home and a chance to enjoy some evening sun.

I crossed the high street, happy to escape the crush and the smell of tired office drones, and more importantly the cool shadows. For all it was warm in the sun's light, without it was like stepping into a chiller cabinet. It was a regular reminder that this was the north, and the sun's warmth remained a precious commodity even in summertime. As I reached the opposite curb, my attention was caught by a young woman stepping onto the road to cross after me. Pretty young women caught my attention rather easily, but as I glanced over my shoulder, she turned on her heel to study the nearest bus timetable.

I appraised her a moment, wondering if I knew her. She was small and athletic, hiding from the sun behind a pair of classic *Top Gun*-style mirrored sunglasses and wearing striped tights and a black bomber jacket covered in badges. It was hardly inconspicuous, and I suddenly wondered if it was someone I met at university. My recall of names and faces was sketchy under normal circumstances, but my memory of university doubly so after three years of long nights, dim student union lighting and lager.

I was sure she wasn't familiar and carried on my way. Yet something had triggered my most base fight or flight response, and a sudden shiver defied the sun's warmth and crept up my spine. It brought me to a stop and I took another glance. She was still there. Seemingly sensing my discomfort, she stopped to take in the contents of a shop window.

Taking this short route from work to bus stop at the same time every weekday, I had started to encounter familiar strangers. I would recognize the faces, eventually even taking some small comfort from their regular appearance. I'd never know their names or their jobs or their stories, but they'd become a backdrop to my life nonetheless. Was the woman one of them, perhaps?

I quickened my pace, hurrying past the coffee shop on the next corner. Stepping out of the bright light of the high street and into the thick shadows of the tall, dark tenements on the road to the bus station, I felt the chill again. I tried to gain some small reassurance from any of those familiar strangers that might be waiting at my bus stop, but the shadows and the change in the light made it

difficult. Every few steps, my head snapped back to look at the corner. Step, step, step, look. Step, step, step, look.

I reached the stop at last, scanning the queue. No one I recognized was present to assuage my rising anxiety. I withdrew into a recessed emergency exit, careful not to break my eyeline to the coffee shop corner. Pressed into the exhaust-fume-stained brickwork, I quickly swapped back to my regular glasses and pulled my jacket from my rucksack to militate against the cold.

She still hadn't appeared at the corner after a minute or two, but I maintained my paranoid vigil. Another couple of minutes passed, and I started to relax. My paranoia suddenly seemed absurd, and I involuntarily let out a snort of laughter, which I tried to cover with a cough. I suddenly felt self-conscious and craved the comfort of anonymity. Just another day after all.

As the Number Eight struggled round the corner and groaned to a stop, I forced my mind to turn to better things: getting home and seeing the cat; maybe putting a couple of garden chairs outside the back door and enjoying the last of the sunshine with a cold beer. It was a weak attempt to take my mind off the imaginary pursuit, but my cheeks still felt flush, and the roaring of blood in my ears continued to dull the noise of the bustling street.

I flashed my bus pass at the driver and headed to the upper deck. I took the seat behind the steps, the one seat that appeared invisible to the onboard CCTV. It seemed appropriate somehow. Wanting to shut out the world, I pushed earbuds into my ears and spun my thumb across the iPod control, quickly scanning down to the easy-listening genre listing.

Which was when the girl climbed the stairs onto the top deck.

I used the reflection from the window glass to ascertain where the girl was in relation to me. She'd gone right to the back seat – the troublemaker's seat – and spread her arms wide, daring another passenger to sit there. I was torn – should I get off again? I resolved to just get off again, and made to move, but a small man with a mop of unruly hair bursting from under the brim of his straw hat motioned to the seat next to me.

I unconsciously nodded, and then cursed inwardly. I wondered whether the small man understood bus-seating etiquette; there were a good few empty seats and etiquette demanded that single passengers fill those before sharing the occupied ones. Old people on the bus always fancied a chat, but instead the small man made a show of sitting down, muttering his thanks and planting his umbrella between his legs. This gave me time to appraise my crumpled companion. The umbrella seemed unnecessarily ostentatious for a clear day like this, but especially when he was wrapped in a baggy jacket and woolly, question-mark-print pullover too. Obviously not local, I decided. Probably thinks it's cold.

Despite this oddness, I felt oddly relieved by his presence. Like a trapped gazelle, I appreciated the safety in numbers. The man then pulled a battered paperback from one of his pockets and began reading. Whatever my inner disquiet, it was clearly not transmitting to the other passengers.

As the bus pulled away with another lurch, I didn't know what best to do. My instinct to run was tempered by the fact that, despite the threat, the last thing

I wanted to do was cause a scene. It's crazy, but I didn't want to face accusing eyes of people I might yet see again, to be forced to ignore the disapproval in the days and weeks that I meet them on this very bus again. Simply, I didn't want to be the nutter on the bus. Yet I was resolved to do something. I turned my head almost imperceptibly towards the stranger and kept my voice low: "Excuse me, but can you help me?"

"Of course," he replied with a soft Scottish accent. "I'm the Doctor." He folded the corner of his page down and stuffed the book back into a baggy pocket.

"You're going to think this is mad, but I think the girl in the back seat is following me."

The man made to turn to look.

"No, don't look!" I protested.

But it was too late, as the man looked anyway. I tried to regain some composure, rubbing at my eyes with my thumbs. The man's next words caught me off guard. He said them quietly, barely audible to anyone but me, which belied their naked threat: "Oh, it's much worse than that. In fact, I think someone's trying to kill you."

It turned out I'd ended up sitting next to the nutter on the bus. "Let me off. Let me off now."

"Good idea," he said. "This bus is too public."

He didn't move to stop me as I stretched for the bell, but I found a firm hand resting upon my shoulder. The girl from the back row was now in the seat behind us and – with more strength than I would presume for a girl of her size – forced me to sit. I felt like a total fool to find myself entrapped like this. I offered them money, my phone, whatever they wanted, in order for them to let me go. For all the immediate physical threat, my instinct still wasn't to call for help from my fellow passengers. For some reason that defied explanation, I didn't want to become the centre of attention. I didn't want to cause a scene. Simply, I didn't want to be remembered.

Sweat beaded on my brow as I made one final appeal: "Please. Please just let me go."

"Gordon Bennett, Professor. I told you I should've done the talking," interjected the girl before I could make even more of a fool of myself.

The Scottish doctor, whom the girl had named Professor, knotted his eyebrows together as realization dawned on him. "Oh, no no no. I think you've caught the wrong end of the stick, Mr. Harley. We're completely harmless." The girl snorted. "Well, mostly. But what's more important is that you're looking at the only two people who can help you."

"I… I don't understand," I stammered. I pinched the bridge of my nose to arrange my thoughts. "How do you know my name? Have we met before?"

"Look," the girl cut in, "I know it's a lot to take in, but you've got to trust the Professor. Despite his best efforts, he's here to help you. Isn't that right, Professor?"

She suggested that it would be a good idea not to return home, and I nodded dumbly. I couldn't seem to get my thoughts in order; the immediate threat had

passed to be replaced by an intangible dread. It was a threat in only the most abstract sense, and the lack of definition left little for my reason to cling to. When the girl asked for a suggestion as to where they should alight, it was a sudden lifeboat in the maelstrom and I clung to the certainty for dear life.

I suggested a piece of parkland just a couple of stops before my regular terminus. I had no reason to trust the strange pair, and if nothing else, my knowledge of the parkland would assist if I required an escape route. I hoped the pair weren't well-versed in local knowledge. Whilst the Professor's accent was a Scot's dialect I couldn't quite place, the girl's was clear, undoubtedly London.

As they followed me along the path between the bushes and into the park, I felt surer of myself. For the first time since leaving the office, I had the upper hand in more comfortable surroundings.

The Professor indicated to a nearby bench further along the path. I sat glumly; it wouldn't have been my first choice. The gentle stream cut through the parkland and severely reduced the available routes of escape from this particular point, and whilst the burn might be shallow, there was no guarantee I could cross it before the girl.

She seemed to sense what was going through my mind and gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"I'm Ace, by the way. If it seems like you only understand a fraction of what he says, don't worry – it's like that for everyone." She smiled weakly at her joke, but I couldn't work up any enthusiasm to return it. I kept my gaze downcast. I had a dozen or more fragmentary questions swirling around my brain, none coming to rest for long enough to be articulated. After an uncomfortable few minutes of silence, the Doctor coughed. I guessed this must mean they were about to get down to business, and also discerned that the Doctor must be in charge. It was only now that I noticed how Ace deferred to him, despite the jokes and the gentle, friendly teasing.

"Have you ever been to Kosnax?" he asked.

For a moment I considered the word "Kosnax." Had I misheard it? It was certainly not a place I'd ever heard of before. "Is that in the Balkans or something?"

It was the Doctor's turn to laugh gently. "Not quite. It's about twenty-nine thousand light years that way," he said, pointing skyward. "No, actually it's that way," he added, moving to point at a slightly different portion of sky.

"It's on the front of a galaxy-spanning war where casualties count in the millions every day. Where the sky has turned to ash and the earth has turned to dust. It's not somewhere I ever expected to find…"

I narrowed my eyes. Despite myself, I was curious to hear where this was leading. "Yes?"

"…you," he finished.

I laughed. A nervous, self-conscious laugh. Then I got up, scanning the trees, looking for the cameras I was sure must be there.

"Okay. Very good. Is this *Candid Camera* or something? Where are they?"

"I can assure you this is no trick, Mr. Harley. It was very, very real, and I'm extremely concerned for your well-being."

Again, it was Ace who offered me sympathetic human contact. She looked me in the eye, and despite my better judgement, I listened to her.

"Me and the Professor were on Kosnax, right. Which was the last place we'd expect to find a human. But we did. We found you."

"Me? I'm still not following." I was beginning to suspect that the pair of them had escaped from an institution.

"Not exactly you you. Other yous. Clones," Ace tried to explain, despite seeming as confused as I.

The Doctor cut in again: "I wanted to find out how an army of Daniels could be involved in a war a million miles from home, but instead the TARDIS brought me to you. I don't suppose you'd be willing to share a tissue sample with me, Mr. Harley."

"You're right. I wouldn't."

Before I could move away, the Doctor swept a silver cylinder, slightly larger and bulkier than a biro, from my head to my feet. It emitted a high-pitched whine as he did so. Then he studied the device for a moment and hmmed as he considered the result.

"The sonic screwdriver," he smiled reassuringly. "It's the same tissue. You died on Kosnax, yet here you are. It doesn't make any sense."

"That goes for you and me both," I told him angrily. "I'm going home. If you follow me, I'll call the police."

The Doctor leapt from the bench. "Good idea. In fact – there's a Police Box just a bit further up the path. If you've lucky, there might even be a policeman inside enjoying a nice cup of tea."

I looked to Ace and then the Doctor again. Ace wore a wry smile, but the Doctor was completely inscrutable. I suddenly felt very silly indeed, like I'd been the victim of a very elaborate practical joke.

"I… I'm not joking," I told them, my voice rising in pitch. To my surprise, there was indeed a blue Police Box further up the path. Even today, right now, surrounded by madmen, this seemed especially absurd. The only time I'd seen a Police Box before was in Glasgow, being used as a coffee shop. Never had I seen one that actually was a Police Box. Less so one hidden in the bushes. I resolved to put an end to this – whatever it was – immediately and marched purposefully towards it.

I reached the Police Box and knocked on the door. I was surprised to find the outside warm and dry to the touch, and made of a material I couldn't identify. There was also a gentle hum that I found quite soothing. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't wood. There had been no response to my knock from inside, so I followed the instruction to "pull to open." The door remained firmly closed.

The Doctor, who appeared soundlessly beside me, coughed gently and gestured for me to push. I did so and the door swung inwards. Beyond was a vast, white space that extended well beyond the confines of the small exterior. Where did it all come from? How was it even possible? In the centre was a mushroom shaped bank of computer screens and buttons, a transparent cylinder sitting at its apex.

I took tentative steps around the outside of the box, half expecting to meet something solid at any moment. I completed a circuit and looked inside again. The interior was still a shock, but not the surprise it might've been on any other day in my life.

Ace was at my shoulder then. "Are you going to stand here long?"

"What is this place?"

"It's the TARDIS. It's our home." It was a vague non-answer, but it held the ring of truth.

"Yeah." I nodded. "There's no policeman, is there?"

Ace was smirking, doing her best not to laugh. It didn't feel like she was having fun at my expense, more that my reaction to the TARDIS was the latest iteration of a very long-running joke.

"And I should take everything you've said at face value, shouldn't I?" I finished.

The Doctor strode inside. Without looking back he asked, "Time for a short hop, Mr. Harley? We're going to see who's responsible for this."

I stepped from the doors of the Police Box and found myself in a richly carpeted corridor. Looking down, I could see my shoe prints left in the pile. There were no others, which suggested there wasn't much footfall here. Or it had just been cleaned. I checked for a cleaner, or a trolley of some kind, anything that would suggest life, but there was none. Only chintzy wallpaper stretching down the corridor and tasteful watercolour prints hung at regular intervals. Between each frame was a heavy mahogany door. The general ambience was of deadening, oppressive silence. I was about to ask where we were when the Doctor placed a finger to his lips to shush me. "It's best that we get moving. There's no way to know if anyone's watching… or listening. The TARDIS is capable of a great many things, but a stealthy landing is not one of them."

There was a bay window halfway down the corridor and I went to take a look. It seemed hard to credit that the TARDIS was capable of… flight? It hardly trundled along on wheels. And yet somehow it had appeared inside a building. So it was hardly flight in the conventional sense. But here I was, looking out of the window to rolling green hills in the distance. I could hardly deny that the TARDIS had moved. Maybe it was like the transporter in *Star Trek*.

A pleasantly kept garden lead to a row of tall trees that isolated the building from the outside world. Again, it was preternaturally quiet. Without any sound to judge, beyond those trees could be anything.

The Doctor indicated that Ace and I should follow him quickly. He stopped at one of the doors and opened it a crack. It creaked loudly and the Doctor made an exaggerated grimace, to which Ace rolled her eyes. "Just get in there, will you?"

Inside was a frail old man hooked up to a number of monitors and machines. They were hardly what you would call sympathetic to the ambience of the room, which was largely as banal and bourgeois as it was in the corridor.

The window was open a crack, and the net curtain fluttered in a light breeze, casting a soft dappled light across the bed's occupant.

I took a closer look at the old man and found myself taken aback. "He looks like my granddad."

"He's more closely related to you than that, Mr. Harley. It's you," the Doctor explained, not unkindly.

"What?"

"The originator. All those other Daniels on Kosnax, dying in that terrible conflict, all created from his cells. And now he's going to look you in the eye and tell you why."

The Doctor lightly slapped the old Daniel's cheek, eliciting a tired groan.

"No, no," I said, moved by the old man's distress.

"Let it go, Professor," Ace cut in, taking the Doctor to one side and allowing me the space to get close to the old man. The Doctor instead moved to the foot of the bed and plucked the clipboard off the footer with the handle of his umbrella. He scanned the pages quickly, flicking several over.

"They've been taking tissue samples from the aged Mr. Harley for quite some time. Further back than the records on this go, it would seem."

Ignoring the Doctor's explanation, I clasped the old man's frail hand in my own. This elicited a gasp from the Doctor, which even took Ace by surprise. She moved to support him, but after a moment he mumbled under his breath and shooed her away, his attention returning to the old man's notes. Distraction over, my own attention returned to the old man as his eyes opened slowly, yellow and rheumy and so very, very tired. When he saw me, he smiled wanly.

"I never expected to see one of you in the flesh," the old man wheezed.

"So you know, then? What's going on out there in space?" I asked. The old man closed his eyes and turned away, breaking eye contact. I squeezed the old man's hand, wanting to provide some reassurance to him even with the knowledge of his complicity. I tried to bring his attention back to me. "Look, I'm not here to judge you. I just want to know why."

The old man continued to gaze out of his window for some moments more, then weakly pinched the bridge of his nose before turning back to face me. "I was dying," he said finally. "Oh, not here, not now…"

"When?" interrupted the Doctor.

The old man barely acknowledged the Doctor. "A long time ago. Before my time." He coughed.

"Yes, yes. When?" asked the Doctor again, this time with more urgency. Ace responded to the anguish she saw in my eyes. Unlike the Doctor, she had been able to intuit that I was finding this interrogation of myself as difficult as the old man. She shushed the Doctor and briefly nodded for me to continue.

"I was visited by angels. They told me there was a war going on in heaven. If I helped them, they'd grant me a longer life. What choice did I have?" he rasped.

"Did you know?" I asked him. "Did you know about me… us… the deaths?"

“They told me that they would be heralds. They wouldn’t be… real, you know? Not… not people at all.”

My head dropped, and I let go of the old man’s brittle fingers. His judgement, and by extension my own, had damned me. I didn’t think I could be so cold. The Doctor had heard enough.

“So that’s it! That’s how you justify it to yourself. Not real! Your life at the cost of what? Hundreds? Thousands?!” The Doctor’s words were cold and hard and dripped with disgust.

I turned on the Doctor, tears pricking at my eyes. “Please. Doctor, leave him alone!”

“Look this boy in the eye. Tell him he’s not real!” The old man turned away from the Doctor’s tirade, the effort required to keep the conversation going now spent.

“Leave it out, Professor. You’re not helping,” Ace cut across the Doctor, but he wouldn’t back down. “Tell him!” he bellowed. I was numb. The old man’s hand fell limp; the extra years he’d bought now expired. Alarms began to sound.

Ace grasped the older Daniel’s other hand. Clasped tightly between the wizened fingers was the alarm button. “You old f…” she began.

“No time, Ace. Back to the TARDIS!” ordered the Doctor.

The Doctor grabbed my arm and dragged me towards the door, but I couldn’t leave the old man. The Doctor grunted as he encountered my limp resistance, and realized my dead weight and the extra seconds were the difference between reaching the safety of the TARDIS and not. Ace turned back from the open door to help, but the first of a number of tall, grey-skinned aliens appeared, their height forcing them to duck as they crossed the threshold. They wore surgical scrubs that covered their faces to just below their large obsidian eyes. Their limbs were long and thin, and it seemed impossible that they could support their size, much less grab us so firmly.

Ace was a dervish of flailing limbs, so much so that she had practically wriggled free of her badge-adorned bomber jacket. The Doctor, conversely, was the opposite, oddly becalmed after his tirade not seconds earlier. Me? I allowed myself to be man-handled, barely acknowledging the commotion. My world and my life had been deconstructed by the words of a dying man, who just happened to be the original me. There was nothing left in me to fight, less still to fight for.

I ignored the wailing alarm. I ignored the words of the aliens as they reported that the escaped clone had been captured. Similarly, I didn’t resist when one alien harshly pushed my head forward to examine the nape of my neck. It seemed momentarily confused when it could not find an identification barcode there. The confusion did not last for long, as another alien made a snort of indifference and told its fellow to tag me up and add me to the next shipment. There was a sharp pain in my neck which almost threatened to rouse me from my torpor, until the anaesthetic kicked in and everything went dark. The last thing I was dimly aware of was Ace’s cry of defiance: “We’ll find you, Daniel. We found you once – we’ll do it again!”

A dull thud that reverberated around and through my skull brought me back to consciousness.

"Wakey-wakey, soldier!"

It took me a moment or two to get my bearings. I was wearing an armoured helmet that fully enclosed my head, while a graphical heads-up display was flashing and flickering before my eyes, and as a result I couldn't get my eyes to focus on what I was looking at. Or rather whom. Confusion reigned – was I looking in a mirror? I waved a hand in front of my face, and my reflection did not mimic the gesture, shattering the illusion. I felt a rising panic then, which caused one of the visual displays to flare red; I tried to struggle free, but found I was strapped firmly in place.

The Daniel ahead of me laughed. "Save it for the mechs on the ground, Beta Gamma One Three. Heh."

My heads-up display picked the face of the other me in a white keyline, and I was suddenly bombarded with a stream of biographical data. From this, I was able to identify the other me as Beta Gamma One One Two. His rank was listed as captain.

I tried to turn my head, but encased in the armoured helmet and affixed firmly in place by an over-the-shoulder restraint like you find on a roller coaster, my field of vision was extremely narrow. The opposite wall was metallic and functional and curved like the fuselage of an aircraft. There was another line of armoured suits, similarly restrained in a sitting position like me, and as I scanned along their number, my suit highlighted and provided information on each. We were all Beta Gammas, it seemed, differentiated only by number.

I was here, I realized, stuck in the war in heaven as described by the older me in another life. Other bits and pieces I'd learned filtered back into my brain. The slaughter of millions and skies of ash, the Doctor had said.

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth, getting the panic under control. The display that had flared turned back to green. It must be monitoring my vital signs, I surmised. I moved my hand again to touch my face, but only succeeded in causing another dull thud similar to the one that had woken me. My vision flickered with interference for a moment, and I noticed that everything had a vaguely pixelated aura, like watching a poorly rendered Internet video.

Captain Daniel, or One One Two my display informed me unnecessarily, laughed again. "Don't worry, trooper. The effects of the cryo-sleep will wear off shortly."

I absorbed the differences between myself and One One Two. He looked leaner, more athletic and held himself more upright than my own more familiar slouch. He also had a crew cut, which I immediately thought did not suit me as it showed off my bumpy, knobby skull. One One Two disappeared from view for a moment and returned with his features suddenly tightened with anxiety. He pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment.

"Pilot says we'll touch down in two minutes and it could get bumpy. Once on the ground, our mission is to break through the mech lines. Deal with any

mechs with extreme prejudice," he said over my helmet mic with a clarity and decisiveness that I'd never heard in my own voice.

I didn't really have time to reflect on his words before my stomach lurched. TARDIS travel this was not. I recalled a roller coaster ride, where the seat was too narrow and the shoulder strap too high, where the impact of my head from side to side caused sudden sharp pains as air was trapped and then released from my ears; it was a similar feeling now, only dialled right up to eleven.

There was an almighty wrenching thud as the craft suddenly made landfall, and the restraints released, causing me to stagger onto the deck. There was a mechanical clank and a sudden whoosh as the inside of the craft was exposed to the outside atmosphere, and a sudden physical wall of percussive sound hit me. One One Two hoisted me off the floor and towards the terror outside. Although he was now in his own armoured helmet, my heads-up display still helpfully identified him.

"Move, One Three!" his voice crackled over the intercom.

I staggered into a violent maelstrom and had to devote most of my energy into simply keeping myself upright. Armoured bodies ran beyond me, reaching over their shoulders to grab the angry blasters affixed to the back of their armour and almost immediately spitting their fury into the orange sky.

I found myself locked up and immobile by the sight of the battle I'd been pitched into. Plumes of black, choking smoke snaked into the orange sky, where huge arrow-shaped spacecraft could be seen hanging ominously. Below, the red earth was a churned, blasted mess, marked only by the heavy boot prints and pitted with holes.

Large machines on six giant segmented legs mechanically trudged forward, like hulking armoured beetles; large cannons mounted on their undercarriages spit bright green death over my head.

To either side, columns of armoured infantry stretched as far as I could see. There were hundreds, if not thousands of me. My mind boggled at the scale of it.

"Don't just stand there, One Three. Grab your blaster!" I was dully aware of the voice – One One Two's voice, my voice – turned hard from battle screaming into my earpiece.

I did the only reasonable thing I could think of. I turned and ran.

A mottled, blast-pocked rocky outcrop was within a short sprinting distance and looked like it would provide ample shelter. My chest was tight from the sudden exertion and my mounting terror. The graphical displays of my vital signs were turning from green to red across the board, which only added to my distress. I felt around the base of the armoured helmet, desperate now to tear if off, but the chubby gauntlet could find no purchase. I turned my attention to my gauntlets and succeeded in freeing my left hand, and was immediately struck by the cold atmosphere as it touched my exposed skin.

As another laser bolt zinged by my head, I turned onto my back to keep as flat as possible, and was allowed a panoramic view of the sky. I felt something unexpected at that moment, something akin to awe. With the hard rock pressed against my back and the immediate threat of deadly mechanical horror hidden from view, although not the hideous sounds of cracking and banging and dying,

I was able to consider the majesty of the scene above. Huge craft glided gently overhead, peppered with the flashes and explosions of soundless vacuum battle. At this angle, it looked possible to reach out from one and touch the next as it passed, a trick of the perspective. Then higher, above even them, was a huge sun, bigger than the one I was used to at home, and casting everything in an orange glow.

Now still, the screams and shouts and horror of the other Daniels fighting and dying on the dusty plain filled my ears. I didn't want to hear it and bashed my helmet over and over against the rock until all that was left was static and the echo of my own ragged breath – and of course the fear of inevitable, explosive death.

I wasn't sure how long I lay there before I was startled by a shadow falling across my line of vision. My helmet display advised me of the identity of the soldier blocking the light, but I already knew it was One One Two.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

The static cleared for a moment. "No members of my squad get left behind," I was informed matter-of-factly. "First drop, eh?" he asked, with some small sympathy.

"Look," I responded after a pause for breath, "this morning I got up and went to work. In an office. Now I'm in some nightmare battlefield God knows where. My day wasn't supposed to end like this."

There was a short burst of indistinct interference, which I took to mean One One Two had laughed too near his mic.

"I'm staying here. Leave me," I told him petulantly.

"Can't do that, One Three. Sorry."

He knelt down and threw me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry with an ease that was unexpected due to my limp non-compliance, before proceeding to run back towards the battle lines. The Daniels were on the retreat from the mech lines, already having sustained a great number of casualties. From the orange dust, now splashed with scarlet, dozens of my own sightless eyes stared accusingly at my cowardice, and I was grateful that others were held still behind their armoured helmets where they could not see my shame.

The great armoured mechs simply continued a slow, yet inexorable march forward, swatting the few Daniels who stood their ground aside. Although the Daniels boasted greater numbers, they seemed no match for their implacable foe. It seemed hopeless, and I was content to wait for the madness to end, to wake up at home in bed, the cat snorting gently before my sleepy eyes in order to get my attention and some breakfast.

But no, the rhythmic bounce of One One Two's heavy steps, his occasional grunt as the rocky terrain dragged at his boots, the flash of an explosion, the nightmare – all stubbornly continued. Would I wake up soon?

There was a sudden, percussive crump from nearby, closer than any sound I had heard thus far. There were harsh, panicked shouts from my audio receivers, and suddenly I was down in the dirt and One One Two's boots were describing a swift arc away from me. I watched him leap on top of something on the ground, but at my odd angle from upside down, sky and land looked one and the same.

I was aware of One One Two's body convulsing for a second, a bright flash and my audio receptors fell silent in respect. The orange sky had a burnt white glow that I couldn't simply blink away, and I wondered for a moment if this was the end.

I became conscious of a sound then, only on the edge of audibility. It was a sound I remembered from earlier that day, when my world was much simpler and much smaller. It was an arrhythmic growl of defiance, a herald of hope. I crawled towards One One Two, my fingers finding less purchase in the dust by the second as something firmer, whiter and friendlier began to manifest around me. The stars and the spaceships and the mechs turned opaque as an indented circular pattern replaced them in my vision.

I couldn't leave One One Two behind. I felt I owed him that. I held onto him as the horror of the battle disappeared like a bad dream. I wanted there to be meaning to One One Two's sacrifice, not for him to be left in the dust on an alien world. I wanted there to be more than that.

His armour was cracked and scorched, and the scent of burnt flesh filled my nostrils. I gagged, and had to swallow the bile as it rose in my mouth. There was no question that he had not survived, but his quick thinking had spared my life, and no doubt those of the other Daniels too. I let out an animalistic howl of despair.

With a dull thud, the sound of the battle ceased, as the calm white interior of the TARDIS became corporeal. I found the quiet deafening.

Ace dashed to my side, deftly undoing the strap under my chin and tossing the helmet away. She hugged me close, whispering soothingly into my ear. Sans helmet, I blinked in the harsh light, the tears streaming down my cheeks. She held me close until the racking sobs subsided.

The Doctor laid an old tartan blanket over One One Two, and then stood bowed over the body for a moment or two. He seemed torn over whether to offer words, or something more tactile, before uncomfortably shuffling back to the console. His fingers danced across the controls and the elephantine trumpeting sounded the TARDIS's return to flight.

The three of us stood over the simple unmarked grave on the windy clifftop in respectful silence. I had insisted on marking One One Two's passing, and much to my surprise, the Doctor had acquiesced. He didn't share the location, at least not with me, but the gentle rolling green hills and clear blue skies seemed as far from the Kosnax war as it was possible to get.

Ace and I had dug the shallow grave while the Doctor prepared the body in a simple shroud. He allowed us time to freshen up before we committed One One Two to the ground. Now all that was left was an uncomfortable silence that the Doctor was reluctant to break. Finally, he coughed gently, suggesting it was time to get to business.

"He threw himself on a grenade and saved me. Us." I tried to get my thoughts in order. "Where did that come from? I don't think I could've done it, but we're both the same, aren't we?"

"You share identical DNA, Mr. Harley, but that doesn't make you the same. He was the result of his life experiences, much as you are yours," the Doctor reassured me.

The Doctor turned away from the grave and started making his way back to the TARDIS. Ace hesitated a moment, before nodding almost imperceptibly for me to follow. Evidently the mourning was over, for him at least, and we were just to be dragged along in his wake. I assumed Ace must be used to this, so returned the gesture and made to follow the little man.

"But you have a little more life experience than you expected when you went to work this morning. So I have a question for you: what are you going to do with it?" the Doctor continued, without checking that we'd made to follow.

I didn't really follow what the Doctor was getting at and looked to Ace for support. She shrugged. I reasoned that this wasn't unfamiliar territory for conversations with the Doctor.

"I don't follow," I said.

He hmmed distractedly, like the way a teacher would with a slow pupil, waiting for me to catch up. "Well, when the time comes for the Kosnax to make you that offer, to live for longer in return for a vast army of Daniels, what will you say? After all, you've just spent an entire morning digging a hole for someone you yourself said was not really real."

I was really confused now. "What? I didn't say that. It was the real Daniel, the old guy in the hospital. He said that."

The Doctor chuckled sadly, but did not break his stride towards the TARDIS.

"That was you, Mr. Harley." He sighed.

"What? That doesn't make sense. Do you mean it was me, as in I was created from him?" I looked between the Doctor and Ace, hoping that one of them would help me out.

The Doctor came to a halt, and I almost crashed into the back of him. "No, it was you you. At the end of your life." He gestured to the TARDIS. "The TARDIS isn't just a spacecraft; it also travels in time."

The Doctor had finally, in a most roundabout way, placed the final domino in place, waiting for me to knock it down.

"You son of a…" I began, before the Doctor cut me off: "Home time, Mr. Harley."

I didn't have to wait long for the Kosnax to visit. It was barely ten years later when the terminal diagnosis came and I was admitted to the clinic. They glided soundlessly into the room one night and made their offer. To my shame, I considered it. But I remembered the self-sacrifice of that battlefield. The hours of sweat and toil digging that grave. And I wanted to repay that, to prove that it meant something.

And I said no.

Kingdom of the Blind

by Kevin Mason

The Room of a Thousand Gods lay shrouded in silence. Ornate carvings, granite statues and elaborate paintings sat expectantly, as if waiting for the deific stillness to be broken.

The silence was torn apart by a clattering, groaning sound that seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The sound increased to a roar, as if time itself were composed of tectonic plates shifting aggressively against each other. A benign light pulsed its way into existence, and a blue box solidified underneath it.

The TARDIS had arrived.

The door of the ship opened inwards, and a handsome young man with a strong jaw and keen gaze was the first to emerge. "Well, Doctor?" asked Steven Taylor. "Is it safe? Do you think *we're* safe?"

Steven looked back to see that Sara Kingdom was the next to step out, coolly and quickly surveying their surroundings. She was followed by the Doctor, who was wiping at his brow as if he'd just carried the others there on his back. "Considering the manner in which we arrived, Steven, I would think that our present circumstances would have to be safer than our previous predicament, wouldn't you?"

Steven nodded. "Any landing that you can walk away from is a good one, isn't that the saying?"

"Yes, quite, my boy." The Doctor leaned on his cane, allowing it to support some of his weight.

"What happened in there?" asked Sara, still looking around. "Just before we arrived, it sounded like the TARDIS was going to tear itself apart."

The Doctor drew in a deep breath, then exhaled. "Oh, all these rapid jumps we've been making, constantly trying to keep moving, it hasn't been good for the ship. It's in need of repair, that much is clear. The fluid link will need to be replaced, and probably the temporal drift compensators as well."

Steven turned to him, alarmed. "Do you have the equipment on board the TARDIS to make those repairs?"

"Yes, yes." The Doctor waved away his concerns. "There's no need to panic." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Having said that, there's no reason to put the work off indefinitely either. It's impossible to know how soon our pursuers may catch up to us."

Steven nodded again. It hadn't been necessary to say what was chasing after them across time and space; they all knew that it was the Daleks. Steven was well aware that there was a living, seething creature inside each Dalek's armoured casing, but there were times when it was almost easier to think of them just as shrieking hate machines; better that than the idea that malice and xenophobia could be so perfectly incarnated in a single living organism. The Daleks conquered, the Daleks schemed and the Daleks killed, all in the name of hate.

Steven caught Sara's gaze briefly, but she looked away. She understood all too well the nature of the threat that was following in their wake, and she had paid a terrible price for that knowledge.

Trying to put the talk of their pursuers out of her mind, Sara allowed her eyes to scan their surroundings, taking in every detail. They were in a massive hangar of a room, which was lit from high above with calming, diffuse light. There were row upon row of statues, sculptures and ceremonial artefacts, each of them seeming to originate from a different culture. She moved from one totem to the next, trying to commit each one to memory, and the likenesses of gods, prophets, kings and martyrs stared back at her. It was like standing amongst the results of a thousand archaeological digs. "What do you make of all this, Doctor?"

The old man held his monocle up to one eye, looking intently at one statue after another. "It's fascinating. Most fascinating. Each of these objects seems to be a religious or cultural artefact. I even recognize some of them." He gestured at one marble statue over two metres in height, its likeness depicting a tormented, tear-streaked face. "I'm certain that this is Li, one of a duo of great prophets venerated by a race called the Ditrani. Li is often depicted as weeping, because she was able to see the future, and she foresaw the suffering and loss that awaited her people."

"That's rather cheery," remarked Steven. "Who's the other half of the duo?"

The Doctor stepped around to the other side of the statue, then gestured for Steven and Sara to join him. He pointed to the likeness carved into the statue's other side, a binary opposite of the one they'd just seen: this one was of a man's beaming face. "Hogh. He is often depicted as virtually radiating happiness."

"And why's that?"

"Because," said the Doctor, "he too could see the future, and he was able to foresee the great joy and bliss that awaited his people."

Sara held a hand up towards the likeness of Hogh. "Suffering and loss. Joy and bliss. Two sides of one coin, correct, Doctor?"

"Precisely, my dear."

Steven cast his gaze around the menagerie of religious iconography, taking in the depictions of angered gods, benevolent healers and wounded saviours. The paintings depicted images of sacrifice, communion and redemption. One painting that caught his eye showed a leonine creature dressed in white robes and reaching skyward; on the other side of an unbridgeable gulf, the creature's god reached down in response. Steven was reminded of a similar image he'd seen in an old Earth history textbook years ago. "These artefacts, Doctor. They're all from different worlds, aren't they? And the people shown in most of these paintings, they're not human."

The Doctor nodded in approval. "Indeed, my boy. Religious artefacts from a thousand different cultures spread across a hundred different worlds. All collected here, in one place."

"But for what purpose?" asked Steven. "And for that matter, where is 'here'?"

Sara knelt, placing a hand on the floor. "We're inside another ship."

"Are you sure?" said Steven. "It looks more like a warehouse to me."

"I do believe that Sara's right," said the Doctor, holding an arm out as if to detect an almost imperceptible change in his balance. "A spaceship, to be precise. Every once in a while, you can feel the direction of the ship's artificial gravity change ever so slightly."

Sara made her way to the nearest wall, and located the outline of a door. Beside it, set into the wall at shoulder height, was a featureless pad. She put her hand to the pad, and the door slid smoothly open, revealing a corridor beyond. Stepping across the threshold, she looked back at them and smiled. "Shall we explore?"

"An excellent idea, my dear!" exclaimed the Doctor, already in motion, his vigor returning with his piqued curiosity. "Come along, Steven, don't dawdle."

Steven regarded the old man nimbly making his way to the door. "Right behind you, Doctor." He looked back at the TARDIS once, and then got moving himself. When he reached the door, he could see that the Doctor and Sara were already a good distance ahead of him down the corridor. He motioned his hand at the side of the door, mimicking Sara's action, and the door slid shut again.

Sealed off from the massive chamber in which they'd arrived, he tugged at the collar of his shirt, and spoke to no one other than himself: "Is it just me, or is it really warm in here?"

He caught up to them in short order, thankful that they had stopped to examine their surroundings again. The air here was even warmer than it had been outside the hangar where they'd left the TARDIS. "All right, I can't be the only one to notice how hot it is in here, right?"

The Doctor leaned on his cane with one hand and wiped at his forehead with the other. The heat and the exertion seemed to have taken more out of him than he might have liked to admit. "No, you're not, my boy, but what's uncomfortable for us might not be so unbearable to the ship's other occupants, hmm?"

"I suppose you're right." Steven looked around, and saw that the corridor was somehow different than what he'd been used to seeing on other ships. The floor itself was flat, but it wasn't smooth or polished; it was mottled. The rest of the corridor was round; there were no sharply defined sides or top. A series of structural supports, a rib that ran the circumference of the corridor, was spaced every four metres. The whole thing made Steven feel uncomfortable.

The Doctor had his hand on one of the supports. "Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. What would the two of you say this ship is composed of?"

"It's not steel, aluminum, or any other kind of metal," said Steven. "And it's not a ceramic either."

Sara spoke, instinctively knowing the answer: "It's organic, isn't it?"

Steven's feeling of unease grew. "You mean this ship is alive?"

"Yes, precisely," replied the Doctor, pleased at Sara's intuition. "I don't know what the outer hull is made of, but inside, yes, this is a living vessel of

some sort. And look around you, there's no direct light source. The walls themselves are luminescent. Extraordinary!"

The Doctor and Sara kept moving ahead, and Steven followed them, wishing all the while that they were headed in the opposite direction. "Shouldn't we get back to the TARDIS? We *do* have work to do there, remember?"

"We'll be on our way soon enough," said the Doctor. "For the moment, why don't you follow Sara's example and be a bit more inquisitive?"

Steven was about to remind the Doctor of an old Earth idiom about inquisitive felines when they reached a point where the corridor ahead of them forked; the branch to the left continued at an even level, and the branch to the right ascended rapidly. The Doctor stopped and leaned on his cane again, assessing the steep incline.

Noting the uncertain expression on the Doctor's face, Sara touched his arm lightly. "Doctor, why don't you and Steven explore down that way" – she nodded to the left – "while I scout ahead on this other passage? We can meet back here in… five minutes?"

The Doctor exhaled deeply, trying not to show his relief. "Yes, that might… that might work best. We can investigate the ship more quickly that way, can't we?"

Sara smiled in confirmation. "Exactly."

Steven didn't even try to put forward an argument against splitting up; he knew that the Doctor needed to slow down, and he knew that Sara was determined to see if there was anything of interest at the other end of that incline. He and the Doctor moved to the left corridor, and when he looked over to Sara, he saw that she had already taken a few steps up the sloped passageway.

"Be careful," he called out to her.

"Stay out of trouble," she replied without hesitation.

With that, she was gone.

Steven let the Doctor set the pace as they walked. The old man was clearly tired, and Steven had no interest in seeing him fall over from exhaustion. The heat wasn't exactly putting a spring in his own step either.

"So what do you think this is all about, Doctor?" he asked. "A living ship, with a cargo hold full of religious artefacts from a hundred different worlds? Is it a travelling sideshow, a roaming museum, or something else?"

The Doctor raised his eyebrows, the possibilities playing through his mind. "Oh, something else entirely, I should imagine. I don't know exactly what, but I'm most curious to find out!"

Steven smiled. There were many words that could be used to describe the Doctor, especially given the different moods through which he could swing, but if Steven had to choose just one, *curious* would probably be it.

The corridor curved gently, and when it straightened out again, they came upon a door, smaller than the one from which they'd originally emerged, but with a similar pad set into the wall beside it. In an instant, the Doctor was reaching his hand towards the pad.

"You just can't resist," asked Steven wryly, "can you, Doctor?"

"My boy, a closed door is practically begging to be opened!" The Doctor touched the pad, and the door slid open.

Steven and the Doctor peered into darkness.

They stepped across the threshold, and two lights inside the chamber glowed faintly into life. Steven noted that, unlike in the corridor, the walls of this room were not luminescent, and despite the two sources of light, the far end of the room was still draped in shadows. It was impossible to tell how far the chamber extended, but its width and height were much smaller than the room in which the TARDIS had materialized.

As their eyes adjusted to the diminished light, they could see what appeared to be a sarcophagus leaning against one side of the room, and a second sarcophagus leaning against the facing side. "More cultural artefacts?" suggested Steven.

"Perhaps," said the Doctor, "but I think not. No, this is something else."

They stepped further into the chamber, and the door behind them remained open. Steven was thankful for whatever faint light was coming in through the door, but it wasn't enough to dispel the shadows at the far end of the room. As they approached one of the sarcophagi, Steven noticed that there was a fine mist hanging in the air in this chamber. Now they were damp as well as hot.

Unlike the images Steven had seen of similar caskets from ancient Egypt, this one had no markings on its sides. It was large enough to fit someone much taller than Steven, and it was tilted back off the vertical by perhaps twenty degrees. As they moved to the front of the sarcophagus, two things became immediately apparent. The first was that the sarcophagus had no lid.

The second was that the sarcophagus had an occupant.

By any definition of Steven's, it was an alien: tall, thin and blue-skinned, though still bipedal, its arms hung at its sides. It had a cranium that seemed much too large for the rest of its body. "Look at the size of its head," said Steven. "How do you think they were even able to walk?"

"Perhaps they were stronger than they would first appear to be," said the Doctor. He looked more closely at the creature's head. Its eyes, large even for its skull, were closed, and it was difficult to tell if the creature was unconscious or dead. There was no hair on the creature's head, and as the Doctor looked closer, he saw something that surprised him. "Steven," he said as he pointed at the top of the creature's head, "look at that!"

Steven moved to the other side of the creature and stood up to his full height. Hanging down from the darkness of the ceiling was a network of tendrils, each of which connected to a jack on the top of the creature's head. Steven reached up and, with a nod from the Doctor, gently took one of the tendrils in his hands. He released it quickly, startled. "Doctor," he exclaimed, trying to keep his voice low, "these cables, or cords, or whatever they are, they're alive! This creature is still alive!"

“Yes it is,” hissed the Doctor, “and if you keep shouting like that, it will also soon be awake!”

As if in response, the creature’s eyelids began to flicker. Steven and the Doctor cast an accusing glance at each other.

The eyelids opened, and red pupils that filled the entire sockets peered out at them. The creature blinked slowly several times, looking first at Steven and then at the Doctor. It opened its mouth weakly, licked its thin lips and tried to exercise vocal cords that had not been used in a very long time. At first, there was only the escape of dry air. The creature tried again, and this time, words began to emerge.

“Tell me…” it said. “Tell me…”

“Yes?” asked the Doctor. “Tell you what?”

“Tell me your story.”

The Doctor blinked, clearly not expecting that question. He drew himself up and, with the hand not resting on his cane, gripped the lapel of his jacket. “I am the Doctor, and that is the extent of the story that you are going to hear from me. Now, why don’t you tell us *your* story? Who are you, and what is the purpose of this ship?”

The creature repeated the name. “Doctor…” it said. Then, after a pause, it reiterated, “Tell me your story.”

“Huh!” fumed the Doctor, exasperated. “Not much of a conversationalist, are you?”

Steven tried to hide a smile at the Doctor’s frustration. “I guess it’s more of a listener than a talker.”

From behind them, in the direction of the other sarcophagus, another voice began to speak. The Doctor and Steven turned, then walked over to the new voice.

Like its twin, the occupant of this sarcophagus had a set of tendrils connected to its head. And like its twin, it was now awake, and it had the same, single question on its mind.

The Doctor shook his head in annoyance. “Hmm! Clearly we’re not going to learn anything here.”

Steven turned slowly, surveying the chamber. “I think you’re right.” He paused though, staring into the darkness at the end of the room. His eyes had adjusted somewhat to the gloom, and he thought that he could see… something.

He walked further into the shadows, and there was indeed something there. It was a third sarcophagus. Like the others, a network of tendrils hung down to it from the ceiling above.

Unlike the others, this sarcophagus was empty.

It took Steven a few moments to process this information. He swallowed. If this sarcophagus was empty, then where…?

Two points of red lit up in the inky darkness nearby, and the third creature lunged at Steven. A deranged expression was on its face as it urgently spoke the same directive as its counterparts. “Tell me your story. Tell me… of your world.”

Steven remained rooted to the spot, taken aback at the creature's speed and momentarily unable to move. The creature gripped Steven's wrist tightly, and the first thought that went through his mind was that the Doctor had been right.

These creatures were much stronger than they first appeared to be.

Much to Steven's surprise, the next thoughts that went through his head were memories of planets he and the Doctor had visited recently: Earth, the swamplands of Mira, the prison planet Desperus and the jungle world Kembel. More and more of his memories began to cascade one after another: the siege of ancient Troy; the exploding planet where they'd encountered the treacherous Drahvins and the benevolent Rills; the Northumbrian coast of England in 1066.

It was then that an insight of his own slipped in between these memories: the creature was telepathic, and it was riffling through his memories the same way that he would flip the pages of a book. And in rapid succession, there was another realization: he could actually *feel* his strength leaving him; his muscles were weakening, and a fog was spreading across his mind as if he hadn't slept in days.

Whatever was passing from him to this desperate, ravenous creature was more than just images in his mind; Steven could feel his *life* slipping away from him, and it seemed as if there was nothing he could do to stop it.

The stream of memories continued, and the next images to appear before him were of his prison cell on the planet Mechanus. He'd spent two years in that cell, utterly alone and doing anything he could to keep himself from going mad. Some earlier prisoner had abandoned a toy panda in that cell, and in an attempt to give himself someone to whom he could speak, Steven had begun projecting parts of his own personality onto the stuffed plaything. He'd even given the panda a name: HiFi. There were times during those two years that he'd suspected he would die in that cell, his final moments observed only by a stuffed panda.

Now the toy was back, filling the view of his mind's eye. Its black-and-white plush body loomed over him, eclipsing everything else as it sat in judgement on him. I escaped that cell, thought Steven, but I couldn't escape that panda. *HiFi is going to watch over my death after all.*

He pushed the thought away, refusing to give into it. Unlike during his years in the prison cell, he knew that this time he wasn't alone; there was someone nearby who could help him, and he used every last bit of his strength to call out his name. "Doctor…" his voice rasped. "It's taking my memories… It's taking my life…"

It had all happened so quickly for the Doctor. Only the briefest of moments had passed since the creature had seized Steven, but the effect on the young man was immediate, and he began urgently and weakly to call for help.

The Doctor rushed forward, raising his cane above his head. “Unhand him, you dreadful parasite!” He brought the cane down on the creature’s arm, hoping to break its grip on Steven.

The creature recoiled, but it didn’t let go of Steven’s wrist. Instead, it turned its head to regard the Doctor for the first time, and its fascination grew. With its free hand, it reached out quickly and snatched the Doctor’s wrist as well. In a voice that was growing stronger by the minute, the creature spoke the exact words the Doctor expected it to say.

“Tell me your story.”

In an instant, the creature had established a new telepathic link, and the floodgates of the Doctor’s memories opened: world after world, from one end of creation to the other. The creature’s eyes grew wider, and its face held an expression of stunned surprise. “So many worlds. So many people. How could this be?” It turned more and more of its attention towards the Doctor, eventually releasing Steven, who fell to the floor like a discarded rag doll.

The Doctor struggled in its grip, overpowered but unwilling to admit defeat. “Release me at once!” he shouted. “And stay out of my head!”

The creature brought its free hand closer, ready to grab the Doctor’s other wrist, ready to dig into a wealth of memories the likes of which it had never encountered before.

Inches away from taking a final hold on the Doctor, the creature hesitated as a new voice called out from behind it:

“Don’t you want to hear *my* story?”

The creature turned, pulling the Doctor around with it.

Standing beside the empty sarcophagus, holding out a welcoming hand, was Sara.

She’d explored along the sloping corridor as far as she could in the time available, locating something that she thought would be of interest, then doubled back to the fork where they’d agreed to meet. With no sign of the Doctor or Steven, Sara had followed the other corridor, eventually coming upon the open door of the chamber of sarcophagi. She looked inside to see Steven in the grip of the creature, faintly protesting that it was taking his memories.

It took all of her discipline not to rush immediately into the fray. Instead, she circled around the outside of the chamber, noting the other two occupants in their own sarcophagi, and all the while listening to the exchange between the Doctor and the creature. By the time she’d reached the empty casket at the shadow-draped back of the chamber, Sara had formulated a plan.

She just hoped that it would work.

Her shoulder against the side of the sarcophagus, she smiled invitingly at the creature and continued to hold out her hand. “You’re interested in memories, aren’t you? Those moments that define a person’s life? I have more than a few

that are rather extraordinary." She held the creature's gaze. "You might be surprised."

For a moment, the creature seemed torn, looking between Sara and the Doctor. Then, it stepped towards Sara, dragging the Doctor along with it. Greedily, it reached towards her, and Sara gave her hand willingly.

The instant that the creature took her hand, Sara focused her mind on one single event – a very recent event that was burned forever into her memory.

She was in an experimental plant near Central City back on Earth, having been sent there on a top-priority assignment. She had just come face-to-face with her brother, fellow Space Security Agent Bret Vyon, whom her superiors had told her had turned traitor against the entire Solar System.

Bret had been shot at point-blank range, and the gun was in Sara's hands.

She had just shot her own brother.

Bret looked at her, and the expression on his face wasn't one of betrayal or accusation. It was just… confusion.

He spoke her name in a whisper and fell to the floor, dead.

Sara focused on that moment and played it over and over again in her head on a loop. It was the worst moment of her life, and she let it wash over her: the puzzled, stunned expression on Bret's face; her own agony at being the one who pulled the trigger on the weapon that killed him. Over and over, she let it play.

The creature gasped in pain at the inrush of such tormented thoughts, and it released its grip on the Doctor.

And that was the opportunity Sara was waiting for. She grabbed the creature with both hands, swung it around and pushed it back into its sarcophagus. As soon as it was in place, she reached up, grabbed a dangling tendril and attached it to the top of the creature's head. She then grabbed another tendril and attached it as well, duplicating the connections she had observed on the other two creatures. She attached another tendril. And another.

She didn't stop until every possible connection had been made. Only then did she allow herself to step back, feeling the adrenaline rushing through her body.

The creature remained rooted in its sarcophagus, making no attempts to climb back out. Instead, its gaze was focused on some faraway point, as if it were listening to a voice that only it could hear.

Sara turned to the Doctor, who was on his knees. "Doctor, are you all right?"

The old man planted his cane to steady himself, and Sara helped him to his feet. "Oh, I suppose so, my dear. I suppose." A flash of realization crossed his face. "Steven! What about Steven?"

They both turned to their friend, who still lay on the floor. Sara knelt beside him and gently touched his arm. "Steven? Steven?"

She and the Doctor held their breath, waiting for a reply. After a heart-stopping number of moments passed, Steven groaned, then opened his eyes. "This hasn't been the best day," he said.

The Doctor beamed. "I knew it would take more than that deranged memory kleptomaniac to stop you, my boy!"

They helped him to stand, and Sara tried to support some of his weight. Steven placed a hand to his temples. “I feel like a marching band’s been doing rehearsals inside my head.”

“Well,” said Sara, “the next performance has been cancelled.”

“Indeed,” said the Doctor. “Now let’s get away from here before anything else happens.”

A voice hesitantly spoke from the third sarcophagus. “For…”

They turned, and saw that the creature was still standing in its sarcophagus. A tortured expression was on its face, and it held one hand out towards them. “Forgive me,” it said.

“I beg your pardon,” the Doctor said flatly, his voice full of suspicion.

The creature’s eyes seemed clearer, as if it were aware of knowledge that had previously been beyond its reach. “Please, forgive me. My connection to the hivemind has been restored, and reason has returned to my thoughts. I have violated my own code of learning only stories that are willingly shared.

“I and the other two Recorders seemed to have been abandoned in this chamber. I removed my connections to the ship, in an attempt to venture out and discover what had gone wrong. With the connection severed, I became disoriented and starved.”

“Starved?” asked Sara.

The creature nodded. “Starved for nutrients. Starved for information.”

The Doctor tutted his disapproval, but the creature continued to plead its case: “I had never been removed from the hivemind for so long, and the longer that I was removed, the more I forgot myself.” It closed its eyes briefly. “I had never been so alone. Strange things can happen when someone is left alone for so long.”

That last statement struck a chord with Steven. “You’re not wrong,” he said grudgingly. “Look, let’s just chalk it up to a misunderstanding and we’ll be on our way, all right?”

A look of alarm now graced the creature’s face. “Please! You cannot leave! Not yet!”

“And why is that?” said the Doctor.

“You must find the rest of the crew,” he begged. “My link to the ship is restored, and while I do not understand what is happening, I do know that we are in danger. We are *all* in great danger, and time is running short.”

Sara caught the Doctor’s eye. “I think I know where to go,” she said.

The Doctor considered for a moment, then nodded his head in acquiescence. “Very well, very well. We shall do as you ask.”

The three travellers made their way back to the door of the chamber. Before they left, Steven looked back at the creature. “Let us take care of this, all right? No more going for a walkabout.”

The creature nodded. “I shall remain here, and await either salvation or destruction.”

Once they were outside of the chamber, Steven placed his hand on the exterior control pad, and the door slid shut. “No pressure,” he said.

They covered the short distance back to the fork in the corridor and now regarded the second branch ascending steeply in front of them. “They’re up this way,” said Sara. “The other crew members. I’m sure of it.”

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks. “I… I must admit, I do find this a bit daunting. It may prove to be quite the challenge.”

Sara and Steven looked at the old man. His encounter with the creature seemed to have left him fatigued, even frail.

“We can take it as slowly as you’d like,” Steven told him encouragingly. He was the first to put a foot forward, and the other two followed suit. “Going up,” he said.

As Sara had promised, the incline didn’t continue for very long, and when the corridor flattened out again, the Doctor pointed his cane ahead, gesturing for them to continue. “There’s no point in stopping now, is there?” he asked.

“No there isn’t,” agreed Steven. He sucked in a breath of warm air, and realized that even he was sweating from the mild exertion of the ascent. “The temperature just keeps rising, doesn’t it?”

Sara led the way forward, retracing the steps she’d taken before. “Perhaps we’ll find some answers about that where we’re heading. It’s not far at all.”

After only a few minutes, they reached a point where two other corridors intersected theirs, and set into the wall was another door, this one wider and taller than the other they’d found. On either side of it were markings in a language that none of them recognized.

Sara looked at her friends with a sense of certainty. “I found *this* door on my previous trip. Unlike the two of you, I thought it best to wait until we were all together before it was opened. Beyond it is where I think we need to go,” she said.

“And where is that?” asked Steven.

She placed her hand to another control pad set in the wall, and this door too slid gracefully open. “The flight deck.”

Steven might have expected to see a command centre of some sort, a full crew busying themselves with the tasks of operating the ship. Instead, there was a quiet, low-ceilinged room with three cathedrae seemingly molded up from the floor itself. Just as in the room with the three sarcophagi, tendrils hung down from the ceiling and were attached to the occupants of two of the three chairs.

One of the stations rotated, and its occupant now faced them. Dark, ancient eyes gazed at them from a wizened, bluish face. Unlike the Recorders, this creature was squat, and its head was not oversized compared to its body. The occupant lifted a frail arm towards them in supplication. “The seven are now six. The Sensor has failed. Please, help us.”

Steven and Sara looked at each other, unsure if they were hearing the alien correctly. The Doctor, however, stepped forward, mustering some of his energy

and authority, and placed a comforting hand on the creature's arm. "We'll do whatever we can to help, of course. I am the Doctor, and these are my friends, Steven and Sara. Now, please try to explain so that we may understand. What exactly is this ship's purpose?"

The alien took in a long breath, as if gathering strength that might flee him at any moment. "Long ago, our world dispatched the Outrider ships to navigate the galaxy, to map the stars and to document the worlds we found. We record the cultures, the religions, the languages and the histories of any race that wishes to share with us. We receive artefacts that any race chooses to present to us as a gift. All of this material will be brought home when our mission is at an end. We wish to return home, but we cannot."

They had all been listening intently. The Doctor leaned forward. "And why is that, hmm?"

"The seven function as one. I am the ship's Pilot." He gestured at the being in the other chair, another blue-skinned, delicate creature. "She is the ship's Guardian."

"So she controls… the defensive capabilities?" asked Sara.

The Pilot nodded. "Each of us has developed and configured our neural pathways for the specific task that we perform. Below deck are our three Recorders. They are living storage devices for all the information we observe and collect. They have given up much of their mobility and autonomy in the pursuit of perfecting and maintaining their memory."

"Yes," said Steven, "we've already met your three Recorders. Charming fellows. Very inquisitive." He had moved around to regard the remains of the alien in the third chair; it had clearly been dead for some time, a deep wound in its stomach the likely cause of its demise. "And this unfortunate soul?"

"That," said the Pilot, "was the ship's Sensor. All external data from the ship was routed to him. He was wounded during the accident and died at his post."

"You said that the Sensor had failed," repeated Sara. "Do you mean that ever since then, you've been adrift in space? Blind and deaf?"

"That is correct. We no longer know our location, our orientation or our surroundings. I cannot maneuver the ship without receiving direction from the Sensor."

"Just a minute," said Steven. "I count six of you: the three of you here on the flight deck, and the three Recorders below. You said that there were seven."

The Pilot looked at Steven as if he were explaining the obvious. "The Outrider ship itself is our seventh member. It is the Host."

"Of course," Steven said dryly. "Of course you have to count the ship." Remembering again how heavy his breathing was, he continued, "I have another question for you: why is it so hot in here? Is this what your normal atmosphere is like?"

The Pilot regarded him, this time with more empathy. "It is not. Our life-support systems are functioning at maximum capacity. The temperature is rising, and it will continue to rise. We think…" He looked almost apologetically at each of them before he continued.

"We think we are falling into a sun."

"What do you mean?!" demanded the Doctor, his soothing demeanour gone in an instant. "What do you mean, *you think*?!"

"It is the only logical explanation," replied the Pilot, "but we cannot know for certain. The Sensor—"

"—has failed," finished Steven. "We got that."

Sara didn't seem to be as shaken as her friends. She knelt beside the Pilot. "What I don't understand is, why don't you have any backups on board? Other crew members to take your place in case of… an accident?"

"There *were* many redundancies in the system when we first departed the homeworld," acknowledged the Pilot. "Over twenty crew members were originally on board the ship, for just the purposes you describe. Some were lost to illness, others during the accident. We are all that remains." He paused. "Without knowing the ship's orientation or rate of rotation, I cannot fire the engines. To do so might propel us towards our doom even faster."

"But we can help you, is that it?" asked Sara. "If one of us sits in that chair, attaches those cables and takes the role of the Sensor, we can guide you away from the sun. We can save your lives."

"Our lives mean nothing, but our great work must not be lost." The Pilot gazed into Sara's eyes, pleading. "All of these years cannot have been for nothing. Our mission cannot end in flames."

Sara stood. "It won't. I promise you."

As she began to move towards the Sensor's chair, Steven placed a hand on her arm. "Now hold on just a minute, Sara. I'm all for helping these people out, but who says it has to be you that gets tied into their system?"

"Yes," agreed the Doctor, "let's think about this for a moment, my dear."

"I have," replied Sara, "and I think you have too, Doctor. You're the only one who can repair the TARDIS, and Steven, you've travelled with the Doctor far longer than I have. You know the TARDIS; you can assist him while I'm connected here. Besides, are either of you really up for this task after your encounter with the Recorder?"

Steven could tell he was losing the argument, but he tried one more time: "Look, before I met up with the Doctor, I was a pilot. I *am* a pilot."

She nodded. "And I was in the Space Security Service, where I received flight training far in advance of yours. We're both qualified to do this job, Steven. The question is, who's best qualified to help the Doctor to do his?"

Steven knew the answer, but he didn't say anything. The Doctor placed a hand on his shoulder. "She's right, my boy, she's right." He turned to the Pilot. "Once Sara's helped you escape from this sun's gravity well, we can disconnect her and she can leave?"

The Pilot nodded. "We would be blind once again, but at least we would be out of imminent danger."

"Well, that's good," said Steven, "because we're not leaving without her."

Sara had respectfully moved the remains of the creature occupying the Sensor's chair, and she sat down, placing her arms on the armrests. Instantly, the tendrils above her began moving of their own accord. They snaked towards her, twined around her arms and legs, and attached themselves to her temples, hands and feet. Sara's back arched at the sudden influx of telemetry, and her eyes rolled up in their sockets. "I can see it," she said. "I can see… everything."

For the first time, the ship's Guardian stirred, as if waking from a deep sleep.

"The Sensor is now online."

Sara was aware of her own body, but she felt removed from it. The massive influx of information from the ship was overwhelming any other sensations; at this moment, she *was* the ship. Data from across the full range of the electromagnetic spectrum was being thrown at her, creating a kaleidoscope greater in sweep than any colours she'd ever seen before. She perceived in X-ray and gamma; she observed in microwave and infrared.

Around her, space whirled, the stars rushing about her at a dizzying speed. She knew that her mind was networked to those of the other crew members, and she spoke to them: "Pilot, can you see what I am seeing?"

The reply was immediate. "I can indeed, Sensor. It is as I suspected: the ship is tumbling through space. I am now firing the attitude control thrusters."

From somewhere far away came the sound of engines, and slowly, the stars ceased their spinning. The ship was still moving, rapidly, but the rotations had now stopped.

Sara began to scan their surroundings, but immediately she knew that their attention needed to be focused on her port side (*the ship's* port side, she corrected herself). There it was, just as the Pilot had deduced: a massive yellow sun that filled half of the port view. It was impossible to judge its scale, but they were obviously hurtling towards it – the energy equivalent of a hundred billion hydrogen bombs detonating all at once, ready to burn the ship down to its component atoms.

The Doctor and Steven stood as close as they could to Sara while still gripping a wall for support.

Steven watched her anxiously. "You *will* be able to get her out, won't you, Doctor?"

"Oh, I should think so, I should think so. But…" His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"But what?" insisted Steven.

The Doctor placed his thumb at his bottom lip, hesitating. "You have to keep in mind, my boy… Sara is going to have to *want* to get out."

Sara felt the solar winds lashing at her like a whip. Wave after wave of cosmic rays struck at her. Even from millions of kilometres away, the sun's effects were devastating.

"Pilot," she exclaimed, "can you get us out of here?! I don't think the ship can take much more of this!"

"I understand, Sensor. I am making further adjustments to the ship's attitude so that our velocity vector will take us directly away from the sun." There was a pause. "Corrections complete. Initiating main engine burn."

Despite all the information rushing at her, Sara was aware of the main engines roaring into life. The entire ship convulsed with vibrations as the thrust of the engines first reduced their rate of speed towards the sun, and then eventually began to take them away from the clutches of its gravitic claws.

An hour passed, and then two. The Outrider ship rushed onwards to deliverance.

The door opened on the chamber of the sarcophagi, and the Doctor stepped inside. Cautiously, he moved into the middle of the room. He addressed the Recorder who, just hours earlier, had been fiercely gripping his wrist. "I trust that I have nothing to fear from you, hmm?"

Standing in place in its sarcophagus, the Recorder shook its head demurely. "I feel great shame that I could have ever caused fear in another creature. Again, I beg you to—"

The Doctor waved his hand. "Yes, yes, all is forgiven. You were not yourself. And I now understand a great deal more about this incredible vessel. I know about your noble goal of returning to your homeworld with the artefacts and histories of so many distant cultures. It's admirable. Truly admirable."

He drew himself up. "As I'm sure you are aware from your own neural connections, my friend Sara is currently serving as the ship's Sensor, helping to guide the Pilot in getting you out of your current predicament. My other friend Steven and I have been making repairs to my own vessel so that we can leave when Sara's task is done. I left Steven in my ship, continuing our work, on the pretense that I wanted to go out and examine some of the artefacts in your great collection. I do not know how long he will stay there before he comes looking for me."

The Doctor glanced quickly back to the door, then returned his attention to the Recorders. "Earlier, you had asked me to tell you my story, to tell you of my world. After learning of this ship's purpose, I must admit that I find it attractive, the notion that my tale might be woven into the grand tapestry that you have created."

He paused again. "You must understand, these are recollections that I would never wish to share with my friends. It would be impossible to leave the past behind if the people with whom I am travelling were constantly bringing it up. But to tell a stranger once, and to know that the story will become a small part of the great legends that you are bringing together? Yes, that idea appeals to me greatly."

All three Recorders were now listening raptly to the Doctor's every word. The one Recorder spoke on the others' behalf. "We would be humbled to hear your tale. We would be honoured to bring it back to our world."

"Well then," said the Doctor, "perhaps we should begin. I will tell you of my world, but to tell you about why I left it, I will also need to tell you about my granddaughter."

The three Recorders leaned their heads forward expectantly.

The Doctor spoke of his home – of another time, and another place. And he spoke of the girl who led him to leave everything behind and venture out into the greater universe.

The Doctor told his tale.

And the Recorders listened.

Sara was eventually aware that the strength of the solar flares licking at the ship was subsiding, and she knew that the danger had passed. "Pilot? We're clear, aren't we?"

"That is confirmed, Sensor. The ship is now safe." There was a pause. "You could remain with us, Sensor, if you chose to do so."

Sara savoured the feeling of space all around her, the sensation of the steady thrum of the engines, the sense of purpose that the other crew members shared. It was that last thought that helped her to decide. "I can't, Pilot. My friends need me."

"It is regrettable, but I understand. You can disengage from the data links whenever you wish."

"Thank you, Pilot. But before I do… You can see the starfield all around us, can't you?"

"As long as you are our Sensor, I can."

"Can you point out the star around which your homeworld orbits?"

"I can."

"Then point the ship towards it as well. And fire your engines again."

The stars shifted around Sara and then began to fade, dissolving into a face. For the briefest of moments, she thought that it was the face of her brother, but then it resolved itself further into that of Steven. He looked at her, the concern apparent on his face. "Sara, thank goodness. We were worried about you."

"I'm fine, Steven. Really, I am."

The Doctor moved into her view as well, as he helped her to remove the last of the tendrils. He beamed at her, delighted. "Welcome back, my dear. Welcome back."

"Thank you, Doctor." She stood up. "We can leave whenever we like. Our work here is done."

"After we finished repairing the TARDIS," said Steven, "we noticed that the temperature had dropped back to normal. Obviously the ship's out of danger."

"Not only that, I've helped the Pilot to plot a course for their homeworld. Once the ship reaches its own solar system, the others of their race should be able to detect it and retrieve it."

The Doctor nodded in approval. "Wonderful, my dear. Wonderful." He turned to address the Pilot. "Sara's work here is done, and we must be on our way. We wish you the best on your journey home."

The Pilot nodded. "Words of gratitude seem inadequate, but they are all that I can offer. Thank you, all of you. And especially, thank you…" He paused, before using her name for the first time: "…Sara."

The Guardian offered a frail but sincere smile. "You made an exceptional Sensor. You will not be forgotten."

Sara returned the smile to the two creatures with whom she had briefly been a crewmate. "And I won't forget you either. Thank you for this opportunity to help you on your way. Goodbye."

Back in the hangar in which they'd arrived, the Doctor, Steven and Sara made their way to the TARDIS. "It must feel good, doesn't it, Sara?" asked Steven. "To have helped these people out?"

"It does," she replied. "Particularly to have put them on a course for completing their work."

The Doctor slid the key into the TARDIS's lock, but he peered at Sara, trying to assess her state of mind. "It must have been tempting though, wasn't it? Tempting to stay on board, and make sure that their mission is completed successfully?"

Sara Kingdom smiled at her two friends. "We have our own mission. And I intend to see it through to the end."

The three of them entered the ship and closed the door behind them. A moment later, the grinding, groaning sound of time being cleaved open began, and the light atop the TARDIS began to flash. The blue box started to fade.

A short distance away, the statue bestowed to the Outriders by the Ditrani was bathed in the flashing light. On the far side of the statue, the face of Hogh was shrouded in darkness. On the side of the statue facing the TARDIS, the countenance of Li, who could see the suffering and loss that the future would bring, seemed almost alive in the flashing light, as if fresh tears were streaming down her face.

After another moment, the TARDIS was gone completely, and the groaning sound diminished to nothing.

Once again, silence reigned supreme in the Room of a Thousand Gods.

A Torch in the Darkness V: Nightlight

by Christopher Colley

Hush-a-bye, Clara-pie,
Her mother sang to warn her.
Hush-a-bye, and don't you eye
The monsters in the corner…

It had rained during the night. She could feel the moisture underfoot as it soaked into the soles of her best shoes. In the noonday sun, the unmown grass glistened as though wet with tears. Clara herself was too numb to cry. She stood at the graveside and let the platitudes wash over her.

"You're in our thoughts…"

"If there's anything we can do…"

"No age at all really…"

"Drivers like that ought to be strung up…"

Clara loathed funerals. She had been to one before. It was not the sadness she despised so much as the tedium. The social niceties. The well-meant clichés. The endless repetition of tired old rituals. Hands were shaken, people came and went…

What she hated most, however, was the grave. The idea of it. Clara had never been good with dark spaces. She stared down into the freshly excavated pit. There it gaped before her, vacant, awaiting its new tenant. The blackness of it rushed up to meet her. Clara shivered and looked away.

She watched the pallbearers shuffling into position on either side, like actors finding their lights. They leaned forward to take up the straps. Just then, Clara became aware of someone standing beside her.

"Hey."

Clara turned to the voice.

"I want you to know I'm here for you, okay?" It was Danny Pink.

But how could he be…? Clara pivoted away from her dead boyfriend to face the pallbearers again. *Then who on Earth is in the…?* Clara watched as the grave fellows removed the boards from beneath the casket.

Oh. Right. This must be Mum's funeral then. She nodded. *Except… Except I hadn't met Danny yet, so how…?*

She felt Danny's hand touch her shoulder. Clara turned again.

"You never mentioned you knew the Shelleys," Jane Austen said. "Your ears must have been burning the other day! I was taking tea with Mary. She told me some *interesting* things… Anything you'd care to explain?"

Suddenly, Clara's teeth were falling out. She realized her fellow mourners had turned into snakes and were wriggling away into the candy-striped hills. In the distance, the Doctor teetered by on a disobliging Tyrannosaurus rex.

But all that Clara could focus on was the casket, as unseen hands lowered it into the earth – deeper and deeper into blackness…

Clara opened her eyes. She was lying by the railings in a corner of the TARDIS control room. She touched the back of her head. *Ouch.* The ship was shuddering. Clara started piecing reality back together again. *Oh. The meteor strike… Of course.*

She picked herself up from where she had been thrown. The Doctor was at the console, precisely where Clara remembered seeing him last. Gimlet-eyed, he was darting about like some frenetic machine. *Probably didn't even notice I was unconscious.*

Her head still buzzed from that weird dream about the funeral. Returning to the TARDIS with fresh eyes and ears, however, Clara realized what had been missing from the ambience. She steadied herself against a railing and decided to re-enter the fray the only way she knew, by tackling the subject head-on.

"So – what's happened to the banter then?"

The Doctor's arms and legs were a blur of shafts and pistons. "Clara, I've made my position on banter perfectly clear." He whirligigged around the dais, pressing this button, then that switch.

Clara rubbed an elbow. "Yeah, but you're always saying things you don't mean."

"Not about banter. Never about banter." His fingers flew with peregrine accuracy, barely touching the controls. The TARDIS roared in answer. "As far as you or anyone else is concerned, my policy on banter remains unchanged: there will be no bantering in here. On pain of verbal abuse! My time machine…" He jackknifed, yanking a lever. "My rules."

The TARDIS lurched forward and back in time and space as it navigated another belt of space rocks. "Come on!" said Clara. "You've been bantering like a professional since Christmas. It's our routine! The *rat-tat-tat*. You know – I say something, you say something. Something happens with an asteroid. Genghis Khan invades the TARDIS. I say something again…"

The Doctor continued his grim gavotte. Clara took a step towards him. "Look, you were bantering away not two hours ago – about my oh-so-important home life, remember?" She paused. "What's changed?"

The Doctor's voice rose, agitated. "What's changed, Clara, is I expected to have found the Alpha by now."

"Don't shout at me."

He looked at her. It was the first time he had done so since she had woken up. "Clara, I've got a headful of the wrong memories. At this moment, my cerebral cortex is trying to tell me I once rescued a theme park from a band of sentient animatronic pirates. I mean… who knew? I'd like to see *you* try and stay all Little Miss Sunshine under those conditions. Here!" He shoved a monitor in Clara's approximate direction. "Take a look at that. The Alpha. The thing's leaving a trail as big as Birmingham through the Vortex. The TARDIS is sniffing her out six ways from Sunday, but she can't get a lock on. It's like the Alpha doesn't know where it's going."

"Is that possible?"

The Doctor tousled his hair. “Anything’s possible. I toyed around with a destination randomizing device myself once. Back in my long-haired, hippie days, you know.”

“Oh, I remember him. A bit,” said Clara. Images from a half-forgotten voyage through the Doctor’s timeline surfaced in her mind’s eye before disappearing darkly again, like apples bobbing in a barrel. “He was fun.” She paused. “Shedloads of banter.”

The Doctor shot her a look. “Difficult teenage years.” He tugged the monitor back towards him. “But this is something different, this goes beyond randomization. The Alpha… it never seems to settle.”

Clara studied her companion, his brows knotting, lips tightening, limpid eyes mining the screens for data. Eventually – “There’s something else,” she said.

The Doctor’s eyes flicked upwards. “What do you mean? Of course there isn’t something else.” He moved quickly around the console. “That’s paranoia talking right there. That’s what too much bantering does for you. ‘Something else…’ What is it with you humans? As if there could possibly be something else.”

Clara moved the other way, heading him off. “Doctor,” she said, a hand on his collarbone, “I know where your face hides its secrets. What aren’t you telling me?”

There was a stillness, like the instant before a dam breaks. Clara noticed the ship had stopped rocking. The Doctor held her gaze. Then he smiled resignedly. “The theft of the Alpha. It’s big.”

“Okay. Really-big big?”

“Really-really-big big.”

“Tell me.”

The Doctor glanced over to a well-used blackboard plonked in an alcove. He went towards it. “Think it through.” He took up the chalk. “The Alpha is an uncontrollable nightmare. Wilful, violent, and the tea- and coffee-making facilities fall well short of standard. So tell me, Miss Oswald – why would anyone steal such a hellish contraption?”

“Well,” said Clara, “I suppose because they wanted a time machine.”

“Think it through.” The Doctor started writing. “We’re talking about someone who stole the Alpha – remotely – from under our noses. It could only be some advanced power from billions of years in the future. Everyone and their robot butler will have a time machine by then. What’s one more or less?”

“Then perhaps just any old time machine won’t do. Perhaps it has to be a TARDIS.”

“So steal mine.”

Clara’s eyes narrowed. She thought for a moment. “Okay. Hold on,” she said. “What was that thing you told me about the Alpha? ‘No restrictions, no limits,’ right?”

The Doctor turned, nodding. “No safety nets.”

Clara started filling in the blanks. “Whoever stole the Alpha… They need a machine that can do things no other TARDIS will allow itself to do. They’re prepared to take the risks.”

The Doctor smiled. “Which means?”

Clara stepped towards him. “Which means they’ve no other choice. *That’s* why you’re so worried. Because no one would want responsibility for the Alpha, unless…”

With the air of a great master unveiling his magnum opus, the Doctor slid away from the chalkboard. On it, he had scribbled two words:

IN EXTREMIS

“Latin.” He flipped the chalk into his breast pocket. “Meaning—”

“In extreme circumstances,” Clara interrupted. “Among the last things.” She spoke slowly, the words sinking in. “At the point of death.”

The Doctor’s face fell. Clara realized she had stolen his thunder. “Sorry.” She pointed to herself. “Teacher.”

The Doctor was confounded. “Yeah, but – *English* teacher. I mean, isn’t that just one up from PE?”

Before Clara could banter back, she and the Doctor found themselves careering into the central console. All at once, the TARDIS had started rocketing through the Vortex. Clara grasped a handle. Books and blackboards slipped their moorings and tumbled all about her. It was everything she could do just to hang on.

“I guess she caught the Alpha’s scent!” Clara shouted over the thundering engines. The Doctor just looked at her, as their space-time ship pinwheeled on…

At last, a familiar rasping sound sawed its way through the general clamour. With a juddering thump, the TARDIS came to rest.

The Doctor rose. “You okay?”

“Yeah. You?” Clara saw that the Doctor was already checking the instruments. She decided to take that as a “Yes.”

She looked around her. The TARDIS seemed uncharacteristically dark. Clara realized the console’s central column was, in fact, unlit. Indeed, there appeared to be no working lights whatsoever, apart from a sickly green glow seeping from somewhere deep within the walls. *Yeah, like that’s going to be a good sign.*

“No coordinates,” the Doctor hissed. “No readings at all. Probably just a kink in the artron supply to the trachoid time crystal… I expect.”

Clara pulled herself to her feet. “So, where do you think we are?”

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks. “*In extremis*?” He turned his face towards the door. “Only one way to find out.” Slowly, he started moving to the exit. Clara made to follow him.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

“Same place as you.”

“Could be dangerous.”

“Even better.”

"Clara—"

"No."

The Doctor looked at her. His eyes scanned their immediate surroundings, as if searching for something with which to win the argument. "What if I said you're a weak and feeble human, and I'll have to spend all my time saving you, and you'll probably just end up twisting your ankle or bruising your hair or something?"

Clara raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"No good?"

"Not even close."

The Doctor grunted. Then he grumbled. Finally, he huffed. "Fine," he said. "But remember – *in extremis*. Be careful! This is a journey into the heart of darkness itself."

He opened the door. Gingerly the pair stepped out into—

"Okay," said the Doctor, his eyes adjusting to the glare. "So… Not exactly what I was expecting."

9:17 AM: John Howe checks his watch. Always a queue, he says to himself. He taps his foot. Queuing for an elevator… when did *that* start? Queuing used to be for nice things, didn't it? Buying stuff in shops. Lining up for a seat on the carousel. Nice things. Or important things – like catching the last bus to work. Not that John Howe recalls his morning commute in any detail. They all rather blur into one, don't they? In fact, for John Howe, time seems hardly to have existed before the present moment. All he knows is that he has been queuing for what feels like forever. He taps his foot again.

He surveys the foyer. Packed as usual. All those suits. All the people – *his* people – seemingly more of them every day. So many faces… One or two perhaps ring a bell, but the others – which ones did he hire again? What do any of them actually do?

John Howe peeks at the dial above the elevator nearest him. He sighs and resumes tapping his foot.

9:42 AM: John Howe gazes listlessly from the window by his office desk while waiting for his computer to boot up. Through the drizzle, he can see the whole city stretching away from him in the thin, grey light. A knock at the door heralds the arrival of John Howe's personal assistant, Toby, bringing John Howe's morning coffee. He must have dawdled on his way; John Howe knows the coffee will be tepid at best. He thanks Toby anyway. Toby smiles and goes. John Howe realizes his assistant has forgotten to bring sugar. *Again*. Never mind. John Howe doesn't even really like coffee anyway.

1:34 PM: John Howe sits down to lunch at his desk. The canteen had sold out of the chicken before he got there, so he opted for the mushroom stroganoff instead. A sad-looking substitute. Formless and beige. John Howe nudges it with his fork. One of the plastic tines snaps off. John Howe stares at his meal.

7:51 PM: John Howe watches the drizzle from his office window on the hundred-and-first floor. Funny how nothing ever seems to get done around here,

he thinks. And yet the machinery of the bank keeps on ticking. Making money somehow. Out of… well, out of what? Algorithms? Yes, John Howe decides. Probably out of that.

He sees the lights of the city, still stretching away in the flat, leaden twilight. He'll head home soon, of course, when he can. But he's pretty sure he has one or two things to finish up first.

And somehow, John Howe knows that something isn't right. There's an indefinable *wrongness* in the air, something he can never quite put his finger on. Surely this isn't how his life was meant to be? He senses there's something important that he's missing. Something that would give his life meaning. A mission. A purpose. Something so much greater than this.

But, as always, the answer lies somewhere just beyond his reach. So John Howe sighs. And he taps his foot.

And tomorrow, he'll do it all again.

"Okay," said the Doctor, his eyes adjusting to the glare. "So… Not exactly what I was expecting."

Lights sparkled everywhere in the damp, slate-coloured evening. The Doctor and Clara were standing where the TARDIS had deposited them: on a walkway, by a body of water. In front of them rose a picture of metropolitan opulence. Monoliths of steel and glass erupted from the concrete. Black-clad figures flitted with desperate intensity hither and thither between the man-made canyons. It was a dystopia of epic proportions. It looked for all the world like London's financial district.

It *was* London's financial district.

A post-rain mist gathered about the tops of the buildings. It seemed to Clara that she was looking at a painting of some latter-day Industrial Revolution. She remembered the old landscapes she had seen of her native Lancashire: black smog belching forth from cotton mills, where workers toiled for thirteen hours a day to make the owners rich.

"It's Canary Wharf," said Clara. She noted the Doctor's expression and wished she could say it was somewhere else.

"Are you joking?"

"What?" said Clara. "No. Why?"

"I wasn't talking to you."

Clara blinked at him. "No, seriously. Look," she said, pointing to a logo atop a particularly eager-looking skyscraper. "Alpha Investment Bank, PLC. All the big boys have their headquarters here. It's Canary Wharf. Really." Something was bugging her. She could not pinpoint exactly what.

The Doctor's bottom teeth looked as angry as the rest of him. "Are. You. Joking?" he said.

Clara frowned at him. "I already said, I'm not."

"And I already said" – he spun round – "that I wasn't talking to you!"

Clara could only watch as the Doctor proceeded to admonish the old Police Box. "This again? I thought we got over this predilection of yours after that

business with the hologram leopard in the bathroom… How many more times? You're supposed to be a time machine" – he stomped his foot in a puddle – "*not a stand-up comedian!* 'Cause you're not a very good one, by the way! Alpha Investment Bank… You think that's funny? You're killing me! Oh!" The Doctor gestured wildly. "Pray tell us, O wry and witty TARDIS – which, I'm guessing, can only stand for Tomfoolery And Riotous Drollery In… you know, In Space… Tell us! What other oh-so-humorous locations can we expect from you, on this magical mystery tour in search of the Alpha? Alpha Centauri, perhaps? The court of Alfred the Great? Alphabetti Spaghetti World? That one exists – look it up."

Passers-by had halted and were recording the spectacle on their mobile phones. Clara sensed that #alphabettispaghettiworld would soon be trending on Twitter if she did nothing to stop it. She touched the Doctor's sleeve. "Doctor…"

"Let me get this straight," he continued with, if anything, renewed vigour. "I say we're going on a journey to the heart of darkness, whereupon you decide to take us to visit… a bunch of bankers! I mean – that's hilarious. It really is! You know, I think you might be a genius… And that was sarcasm, in case you hadn't noticed. Grow up! They're just bankers! Greedy, materialistic, selfish egomaniacs, yes! But hardly the Terrible Zodin, are they?"

Clara grabbed her friend's lapels, shaking him. "Doctor!"

"What?!"

Clara meant to say she thought he was behaving like a lunatic and that the best way to avoid being immortalized as "angry eyebrow man" on YouTube would be to stop shouting at a telephone box right now. But all she said was "Hmm… That's weird."

The Doctor looked at her. Clara's brow creased. "Okay, so it's probably nothing, but… Alpha Investment Bank, yeah? The largest bank in the world, right? I mean, everyone knows that, don't they? Everyone on Earth has heard of Alpha Investment Bank. Huge, multinational organization. Biggest revenues in history. They're in every country in the world, and they've been around forever. We all know Alpha Bank."

"So?"

The spectators with their mobile phones had started drifting away. Clara spoke, her voice low, "So – why can't I remember ever having heard of Alpha Bank before?"

For a moment, the Doctor just stared at her. Then his face blossomed into a garden of eyes and teeth. "Oh," he said. "Oh-ho-ho… You are beautiful!"

Clara smiled. "Why? What did I do?"

"I wasn't talking to you." The Doctor started to turn, then he checked himself. "No, I didn't mean… Look, Clara, I'm sure you're beautiful too, in your own way. I mean, there are probably loads of humans who'd be attracted to that whole… moon-faced thing you've got going on. But *you*…" – he addressed the TARDIS – "You. Are. Beautiful! Clara, don't you see? We're talking about technology that can whip up a bank out of thin air and alter the memories of every person in the vicinity, making them *think* it's always been there. Clara, the

TARDIS wasn't joking! She's brought us to exactly the right place. This can only be something to do with the Alpha TARDIS itself!"

The Doctor was already halfway across the road, splashing towards the registered offices of Alpha Investment Bank, PLC. Clara glared at the TARDIS. "No need to look so smug…" She headed after the Doctor.

"Good evening, sir. Madam." A receptionist rose to greet them as they pushed their way through the revolving door. The sound of Clara's heels echoed about the marbled hall. "Welcome to Alpha. May I take your names please?"

"Doctor. Clara."

The receptionist consulted an open appointment book. "Ah, yes. Here we are: *eight PM – Doctor. Interview with CEO.*"

The companions exchanged looks. "Sorry, did you say interview?"

A smile. "Yes, sir. You are expected. If you'd be so good as to follow me, I can take you right up." A button was pressed, and the glass barrier doors by the side of the reception desk hissed apart. The Doctor hesitated for a moment, then passed through as indicated by the receptionist. Clara made to follow. The doors snicked shut in front of her.

"Registered guests only, I'm afraid, madam."

"It's all right, she's with me."

"I'm sorry, sir, it's not possible—"

Clara pressed her hand against the glass barrier. "Doctor."

The old Time Lord faced her, speaking softly. "Clara, I get the feeling that this is one I should be doing alone anyway. Get back to the TARDIS. She'll keep you safe."

"And what about you?" There was motherly concern in her voice.

"Clara, listen to me." He placed his hand against hers. "Go back to the TARDIS. The auxiliary power won't last forever. Try to get her working again." He nodded, his eyebrows doing the talking. "It could be very important." He smiled. Then he turned. The receptionist led the Doctor around the corner to the elevators. Clara heard a ping, then she heard no more. She watched the spectre of the Doctor's hand fade to nothingness on the glass.

The evening had grown cold. Clara made her way back to the TARDIS. She opened the door and stepped inside. The gloom was deeper than when she and the Doctor had left. The glow from the walls had dwindled to a kind of oozing luminescence that turned Clara's stomach. It rose and fell with the thrum of the engines. Clara could feel them vibrating up through her feet, each revolution slower and weaker than the last, like the heartbeat of some dying behemoth. The Doctor was right: the ship needed attention. But what in the world was she supposed to do?

Clara hated being by herself in dark places. It reminded her of being a little girl, alone in her room at night. She shuddered. As a child, she had always been a difficult sleeper, excited into restlessness by fear of what she saw – or imagined she saw – crouching in the shadows when the lights were turned off. She remembered how her mother would stay up for hours on end, comforting her and singing. Sleep always came in the end, of course, though rarely without a struggle, and she never dozed off without a nightlight.

Clara's train of thought was interrupted by the realization that she was unable to see. Not a plunged-into-blackness kind of being unable to see. Quite the opposite: it was almost as if Clara were standing in the only patch of light in an otherwise unlit room. As her eyes adjusted, she saw that such was indeed the case. Clara found herself at the centre of a cone of light, approximately two feet across at its base, thrown by a single spotlight directly above. All around her, as far as she could tell, the ship was in darkness. Everything bar her immediate surroundings had been cast into unknowable shade. The TARDIS, Clara guessed, was conserving energy. With power running out, it had made the executive decision to expend its last residues on Clara alone. She almost felt touched. In the encircling penumbrae, the teacher could make out scant detail of the TARDIS floor and, beyond that, nothing at all.

Clara became aware of a drumming sound, steadily increasing in tempo. She realized it was the sound of her own heartbeat. Her mind started racing. All at once, she was back in her childhood room, unable to sleep, as half-glimpsed nightmares crept ravenously from the shadows. A cold perspiration bespangled Clara's brow. The fine hair on her forearms stood on end. She felt the space around her column of light heaving with starving monstrosities – slithering, dragging themselves towards her. And chief among them, she knew, was that crouching shape from the corner of her room, with its hungry smile and madness in its eyes.

Clara squeezed her eyelids shut in terror. As she did so, she thought she felt the light flicker and dim. She opened her eyes again; sure enough, the spotlight's intensity had reduced somewhat. She could also discern a similar circle, perhaps ten feet away. The ship appeared to be splitting the available current between two light sources. *But why?*

As if in answer, Clara's light flickered once more and dimmed further. The second spot appeared to grow brighter. Suddenly it was obvious to Clara what the ship intended. She would have to make her way to the second spot – teeming though the intervening blackness was with things with eyes and things with legs, and thin shapes that stalked gigantically in the night…

Come on, Clara, pull yourself together! Do it, and do it quickly. You didn't come second in Year Eight Cross Country for nothing – what's ten feet? Just focus, brace yourself and… go!

But nothing happened. Clara's legs refused to budge. She stood for what felt like minutes, willing them to work. She could almost hear the ship's precious artron energy ebbing away.

The monsters had her surrounded now. She felt their foetid breath upon her neck. "It's all in my mind," Clara told herself, "all in my mind" – though she was far from convinced it was true.

Her light blinked again and dimmed further still. The TARDIS was leaving her with little choice.

"So, it's like that, is it?" she said out loud. "My way or the highway? You're as bad as Jane Austen…"

Another blink. Her light was almost gone.

Clara shook herself. She braced herself for the leap. She could hear them now for certain, all around her. She heard their fungous footfalls and the scrape of gnarly fingernails catching on perforations in the floor. She wanted her mum. In her mind, a vast grave yawned open before her…

Run, you clever girl!

As the light about her shuddered and died, Clara launched herself towards the second spot, skidding to a halt dead centre after what had been the longest half-second of her life.

She was panting heavily. "In your face!" she shouted at the shadows. She leaned forward, her hands on her knees. "See? Wasn't so bad, was it? What did I tell you? All in your mind."

She shut her eyes and tried to switch off the hellish apparitions that clawed at the inside of her skull. Whatever she had just experienced, she sensed at some level that it was somehow connected with the theft of the Alpha. Suddenly, she became aware that the light surrounding her had diminished in intensity. She opened her eyes and her heart sank. There was a second spotlight, about ten feet away, further towards the TARDIS interior. Wherever the ship was leading her, clearly the journey was not over yet.

Already Clara could hear the baying of unseen monsters, their cries gaining incrementally in volume. Tongueless mouths called hungrily for Clara's bones. She readied herself for the dash. It was going to be a long night.

My! My! Clara-pie,
How ripe you look and fresh, dear!
So join us, pet – you'll find we're yet
More fearsome in the flesh, dear…

The entire building seemed transparent. Through the reinforced glass, the Doctor could see as far as Battersea Power Station in the west. The ghost of the setting sun painted the Thames amber. The river looked alive as it congaed towards Alpha Bank, tiring as it passed, rolling on sleepily into evening.

On the hundred-and-first floor, the Doctor followed the receptionist along a circuit-board pattern of corridors. Indistinguishable conference rooms opened out on either side of them, all presently untroubled by conferencing. Leather chairs sat unoccupied; hotel wall art hung unobserved, unable to offend artistic temperaments in the gathering dusk.

The passageway lit up in sections as they passed. The Doctor was aware of the thud of his footfalls on the hollow floor. There was no other sound, except perhaps the rumble of a generator somewhere, regulating the lights. The Doctor felt the corridor behind them slip back into darkness as they passed. The building knew what it was doing – rather like the TARDIS, he thought.

Eventually, they drew level with what appeared to be a large corner office. The receptionist halted. "Here we are, sir."

The Doctor peered through the office walls – mostly glass like the rest of the building. There were no lights, bar a faint glow coming from what appeared to be a computer monitor facing the other way. Clearly no one was home.

"The Doctor will be with you presently."

"What did you say?"

"The Doctor." A smile. "Dr. John Howe." The receptionist nodded towards a small plaque by the office door. The Time Lord leaned towards it:

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
ALPHA INVESTMENT BANK, PLC.

He turned again, but his guide was already halfway down the corridor. He watched the sparkle of the receptionist's Jimmy Choos receding silently into blackness as the corridor lights switched off. The Doctor pressed his face to the glass again. Nothing. He cleared his throat. He gripped the handle, pushed open the office door and stepped inside.

The lights flicked on. A large ebony desk. Chair on either side. Minimalistic. Simple. Instantly, the Doctor fell to inspecting his surroundings. Not much to go on. No papers. Just a desktop computer in the process of booting up. A keyboard and mouse. All a good ten years out of date. The Doctor stooped. He sniffed the keys. No sign of wear. He frowned. He rattled the desk drawers. Locked. He stood and scrutinized the nearby area. One black leather office chair pushed back against the glass. A lined wire bin. With something in it… The Doctor knelt. Mushroom stroganoff. He sighed.

The only articles of interest appeared to be mounted on the walls. Gold and silver discs hung side-by-side with original album art. Clearly the room's primary occupant was a music lover. The Doctor made his way around the office. There was a signed photograph of Elvis from his Aloha days… an all-American watercolour by Bob Dylan… a cabinet containing a pair of Dolly Parton's rhinestone boots… Pride of place, however, belonged to an object in a display case attached to a pillar near the centre of the room. It was an electric guitar – a weird-looking specimen. It was as though four men had each touched part of a Fender Stratocaster in a darkened room, and then tried to recreate the thing by committee. Even among the collection's other artefacts, however, the care lavished on this one item marked it out as something special. The Doctor bent to examine it. There was a signature on the pearloid pickguard. Presumably the autograph of some rock god or other, whose guitar it must once have been. The Doctor squinted at the name…

"Can I help you?"

Without turning, the Doctor flung an arm backward and pointed to the figure now standing in the doorway. "Dr. Howe, I presume! Sounds familiar – are you spelling that with an 'e'? Never mind. I've just been admiring your collection. I see you have Ringo Starr's guitar. That's interesting, isn't it?" He spun to face his interlocutor. "Okay. That was the small-talk part. I don't like the small-talk part. I'm not a small-talk person. Let's call that bit done, shall we? I think it's time you and I had a little chat. I'll start." He sat down. "So –

obviously the Alpha isn't here. It's a city. A space city the size of Greenwich. Made of brick and bone. I think someone would have noticed, don't you? So, the question is… what have you done with it?" He fixed John Howe with his most penetrating stare. "What exactly are you up to?"

The CEO's jaw hung over his Double Windsor knot. "I might ask you the same question!" he said at length. "Who the hell are you?"

The Doctor inspected the person before him: an unassuming-looking fellow of early middle-age. He had the appearance of a man who, in his youth, had backpacked around Thailand and dreamed of seeing the world, but for whom the only window seat now available was a desk chair in a corner office. His swept-back hair receded at the temples, streaks of grey intermingling with light brown. Hooded eyes betrayed a man unable to get much sleep, while the pattern of lines around his square jaw and tight mouth suggested that, when sleep came, he ground his teeth all night. There was genuine befuddlement is his face. The Doctor decided to backtrack.

"My bad. I'm here for the interview. I thought you might have seen my CV… Skills and interests: amateur dramatics? I was just giving you a taste. It's my theatre group, see? We're doing this show. It's called *The Space City of*…" – the Doctor looked around – "*of Ringo Starr*." He paused. "It's experimental."

John Howe blinked. "Oh."

"Tell you what. Forget all that stuff about a space city. Obviously there's no such thing as a 'space city'! I mean – that would be crazy, right?"

John Howe smiled uncertainly. "Well, yes, I suppose so…"

"Let's start over. Impressive collection you have here! You must be quite the music fan."

"Music? I… I'm afraid I don't follow." The Doctor's eyes tightened. He gesticulated about the room. "Oh!" said John Howe. "My collection. Yes." He entered, shutting the door behind him. "I'm sorry – an interview, you say?"

"That's right." The Doctor stood up. "For the, uh… for the job. The big job."

John Howe ran a hand through his fine hair. "That's strange. I don't seem to recall…"

The Doctor cocked his head. "It was in the book."

"Oh." John Howe automatically straightened up. "Well, in that case… If it was in the book, then I suppose… Do you mind if we…?" He gestured. The men swapped places. The CEO placed his BlackBerry smartphone device on the desk and settled back into his chair, unlocking a drawer. The Doctor took his seat opposite.

John Howe produced a binder and pen. "Right then – *allons-y!*" The Doctor regarded him steadily. John Howe read aloud, "To start with, why don't you tell me about an occasion when you had to make a difficult decision?"

The Doctor leaned back in his chair. "All right. Well, there was this one time I was stuck in the '70s. Might have been the '80s. Doesn't matter. I met this man with a fragment of a Dalek time-ship embedded in his chest. Removing it could kill him – but it could also mend the TARDIS, so…" The Doctor saw that his interviewer had stopped taking notes. "Problem?"

"That – isn't really the sort of thing I had in mind."

"Oh. No?"

"Let's, uh…" John Howe flipped to a different section. "Perhaps we should try another question. What would you say is your biggest weakness?"

"Well!" The Doctor stretched out. "I used to be very partial to neutron flan!"

John Howe grinned. "Didn't we all?" He paused. Slowly the smile faded. He frowned, shaking his head. "No… that's not right either."

"Ask me another. Go on."

John Howe massaged his right temple. He turned the page. "Describe a situation when you showed real leadersh—"

"Easy!" The Doctor's feet were already on the desk. "Ancient Greece. A bronze chamber in the courtyard of the palace of King Acrisius. A young mother. Terrified. Without help. Susan wanted to save her. But I—"

"It's a lie!" John Howe was on his feet. "Susan left long before Greece. Do you think I could forget when I said goodbye to my own…?" He stopped.

The Doctor smiled sadly at him. "Of course not. *Allons-y… Don't-we-all-like-neutron-flan…* How could I not know you? Even when you don't know yourself! All that time hunting for the Alpha, it never occurred to me… Who has form in stealing a TARDIS?" The Doctor stood. "Who else could it ever have been?" He held out his hand; John Howe shook it, uncomprehending. "I must say – it's a pleasure to meet me."

"So!" the Doctor continued. "Which one of me are you? Fifteenth? Fiftieth? No, don't tell me! I like surprises. I've got to say, as surprises go… you're not bad! I can imagine Bill Nighy playing you in the movie version. I mean, you know what it's like, meeting the replacements – normally the disappointment of the century! But you're all right, aren't you?" John Howe slumped forward in his chair. He rocked gently back and forth, clasping his head. "Yeah. Well…" the Doctor said. "No one's perfect."

He stepped back and looked around the room. "See, I knew immediately there was something off with this place. How about that receptionist of yours? Walking down the corridor without making a sound… On those heels? They didn't even match his suit." The Doctor wrapped the wall with a knuckle. "Just another glitch in the system. Like Ringo Starr's guitar. I mean – seriously? This whole place… it's a hard-light projection. And not a very good one. So! To the burning questions of the hour: where's the Alpha?" He scrutinized the man in the chair. "And are you a projection too?"

A thousand images flooded John Howe's brain… *The fabric of night is a-wriggle with things with claws and things with fangs. A gestalt being as old as time. A single thought. Survival. A man stands on the precipice. A Doctor at the end of everything. He knows what it wants. He knows what it will do to achieve it – what it will risk. He foresees everything that ever was, rendered misshapen and grotesque. It cannot be stopped. But the man with two hearts knows how to stop it. He is older and wiser than the universe – one learns a trick or two. As the universe dies around him, he casts his mind into the void. He finds and steals the Alpha…*

The story poured like water from a jar. The Doctor looked on, his eyes agape. John Howe seemed hardly aware that the words were coming from him. "So the Doctor created an artificial intelligence," he was saying. "A holographic projection of his own mind…"

"In other words – you."

"Yes. To keep the Alpha manned. And lit."

"Lit?" the Doctor frowned. "Why lit?" But his words did not register.

"We've been drifting ever since," John Howe concluded.

The Doctor put his hands in his pockets. "For how long?"

There was a pause. "For the lifespan of the Alpha."

The Doctor could not speak. Eventually – "You mean to tell me…" he spluttered. "But the Alpha has a half-life longer than the span of all history!" The Doctor whistled. "No wonder you're fraying at the edges. So – an aging AI, trapped in a never-ending cycle of maintenance. After a few billion years, you forget who you are. All you can remember is that you're a doctor – *Doctor Howe*." He chuckled darkly. "And all of this, then, the building we're in…"

"Is the Alpha TARDIS itself." The Doctor's mouth froze. John Howe closed his eyes. He continued, his breathing labored: "The Alpha drew inspiration for its appearance from the condition of the AI."

The Doctor smiled giddily. He spoke at pace, "Hence Alpha Bank. A corporate monstrosity! All process and red tape, no organizational memory. Mirroring the state of your mind. Eventually, the Alpha begins to run out of juice. It can't drift forever, so it plops you down in Canary Wharf – basically heaven for banks. But the system's imperfect." The Doctor glanced at the artefacts around the room. "It gives the CEO a music collection he knows nothing about. And the staff…" He turned back to John Howe. "I take it they're data phantoms, yeah? Ghosts of the Doctor's thought processes? Fragments of my other selves, jumbled up, bleeding through?" John Howe nodded. The Doctor's head was spinning. "I wonder which one of me wears the receptionist's shoes…"

He moved to one of the interior walls, splayed his fingers and pressed the tips against it. He felt the rumble of the ship's engines. He shut his eyes and dropped his forehead to the wall. "I should have known. All along. As if it was conceivable that all you were doing was regulating the lights…" He turned. "This is fascinating. But, now that I've found the Alpha, what I really want to know is – what exactly have you been keeping it safe *from*?" He leaned over the desk.

"And what happened to the real Doctor?"

Clara groped inside the wall cavity. Sweat dripped from the end of her nose. The bulb above her flickered and buzzed. The TARDIS had led her to a corridor on one of the lower levels. The spotlights had grown progressively tighter, the spaces between them wider, as the ship sought to conserve what energy it had left. Now, Clara crouched in a circle of light barely large enough for her feet. The phantoms that plagued her had not let up. Involuntarily, she brushed an

invisible crawling thing from her shoulder as the light flickered once again. *Please don't go out… Please don't go out…*

She had removed a section of hatch covering. There was a metal canister on the floor of the cavity, dislodged by the journey through the Vortex. Clara could see where it belonged: there was a canister-shaped gap in the centre of the alcove, right between two unconnected ends of power line. One of her fingertips grazed the object. *Almost…!* Her arm was quivering.

The light sputtered. The circle seemed to snap to the diameter of a coffee mug. Something with no face hissed in Clara's ear. She looked up. She could see the filament above her. A tiny coil of red. Its glow dissolving into the blackness of the surrounding bulb as the TARDIS surrendered its last reserves of power. There were monsters everywhere now. Pressing in. Their screams deafening in Clara's ears. She flattened herself against the hatchway. Her fingers found the cylinder! Clumsily, by touch alone, she tried to plug it back into the system. It felt as though her arm would pop from its socket. The light died. The abyss swallowed her up. The ghouls swarmed in…

Clara felt a click. The canister had slotted into its proper place. There was a glugging sound as power surged through the conduits. With a rising hum, the lights slowly came on again. Breathing rapidly, Clara whipped her head around. The corridor was empty.

She looked down. Her hands were shaking. She remembered the songs her mother used to sing to her, to frighten away the monsters. She leaned back against the mesh wall and shut her eyes, exhaling. She smiled. *Clara one, monsters nil.* Then she lifted her hair from her face, clipped the hatch door back into the housing and stood up.

As Clara re-entered the control room, the phone on the TARDIS console was ringing. *Unknown number…*

"Hello?"

"Clara!" It was the Doctor.

"Hello, stranger! How are things at the bank? Mis-sold any mortgages yet?"

"Clara, listen very carefully. I'm going to need a favour."

"Sure. What?"

"*Save my life!*"

The line went dead. Clara stared at the phone. Her eyes flicked to the panelled windows in the external doors. There was something happening outside. She rushed to the doors, pulled them open and stepped into a hurricane.

Alpha Bank – the entire skyscraper – was evaporating. A desperate noise shredded the air, like the TARDIS dematerializing but writ large. Clara's hands covered her ears. She had heard that sound before, back on Refuge. She recognized the howl of the Alpha. At every turn of the antique engines, the building faded in and out of existence, growing increasingly see-through with each revolution. A cyclone tore around its base, threatening to uproot the linden trees that lined the thoroughfare and causing the River Thames to splosh over the quayside. The detritus of London's pavements filled the air. Passers-by huddled together, shielding their eyes – so much so that most failed to see what Clara saw: every time the building disappeared, near the top… there was a man.

In a dark coat with red lining. Suspended in mid-air. He was falling through the building, floor by floor.

Two minutes earlier, the Doctor had been standing aghast in John Howe's office. "I don't believe you," he was saying. "That can't be! What can I do?" But no answer was to come. The Doctor watched as the projection of John Howe glitched out of existence. It was replaced by a vision of a man standing on the brink of an abyss. His clothes were torn. He wore a mask crafted to resemble the head of a raven. The blackness was all around him. *And the blackness was alive*. As the universe entered its death throes, the mask slipped from the man's face. It was John Howe – the real John Howe, the Doctor himself – standing as he would one day, at the end of all things. For a moment only, his face was visible. The scarring was… Then the maw of the universe opened up. And as the man died before his very eyes…

The Doctor collided with the floor. Not the floor he had been standing on but the one below it. The Alpha was dematerializing and seemed singularly uninterested in taking passengers with it. Everything was vibrating. As the Doctor made to pick himself up, the Alpha shifted out of state again. He felt the floor turn gelatinous beneath his body. Momentarily, he saw an underlying pattern of ancient circuitry before that too dissolved. Then he was falling. This time the Alpha solidified around his waist. Flooring tiles and girders jammed into his ribs. He yowled in pain. Papers and other paraphernalia scattered about him. Somewhere in the middle, Ringo Starr's guitar thudded to the floor. The engines bellowed. As the intervals stretched, the Doctor knew, his rate of descent would accelerate. He was poised to fall ever-greater distances. The floor started to turn translucent again. He looked down and immediately wished that he had not.

Just then, a small object dropped to the carpet a few feet away. It was John Howe's BlackBerry. The Doctor snatched for it, but the floor swallowed him up. The building caught him again, one level down, this time just below the armpits. The BlackBerry had fallen with him and looked to have landed a little closer this time. The walls started turning hazy again. The Doctor reached for the device… *Just in range!* He felt himself slipping, the phone morphing in his hand. He dialled the number for the TARDIS and braced himself for impact.

Clara raced back inside. She knew what she had to do. *Materialize around the Doctor! Save his life!* She threw a lever. The TARDIS revved weakly. She tried again. *Not enough power… It hasn't had time to build up!*

"No, no, please! Not now!" Clara said out loud. "He hasn't taught me the advanced stuff yet!"

She pressed a button. A live feed of the Alpha appeared on the scanner screens. By now, the Doctor was falling several floors at a time. Clara's palm went to her forehead. *What can I do?* At the bottom of the images, quantities of the Thames were gushing over the quayside.

Clara remembered something the Doctor once told her: “If the TARDIS were to land with its true weight, it would fracture the surface of the Earth.” *I wonder…*

She moved to a segment of the console that housed the TARDIS telepathic circuits. The squidgy, pink interface glowed expectantly. She slipped her fingers between the gills. “Okay, gravity,” said Clara. “It’s you and me. Let’s get relative…” She shut her eyes and thought about heavy things.

Lead piping…

There was a cracking sound. Clara felt the ship judder. Outside, fissures appeared in the pavement around the Police Box. The TARDIS sank an inch or two into the concrete.

The complete works of Proust…

As the gravitational pull of the TARDIS increased, scientists around the world observed erratic behaviour in tidal patterns. Nowhere was the effect more pronounced than in Canary Wharf, where a mini tsunami roared down Harbour Quay.

Courtney Woods’ detention file…

The deluge coalesced roughly around an old Police Box, situated near Alpha Investment Bank, PLC. The picture on the TARDIS scanner turned bubbly as the river surged over the ship’s roof. A maelstrom was churning around the skyscraper’s base, reaching as high as the second or third storey.

The Doctor clutched his side. He must have fallen ten floors that time. He sensed that the next dematerialization would be the last. The boom of the engines was deafening. The floor turned squishy again. He looked down to see water flooding the space being vacated by the vanishing bank. He estimated himself to be 150 feet above surface level. *Survivable…* As the Alpha relinquished its hold on him, the Doctor fell for what he knew would be the final time. *Best estimate – three seconds to impact!* He twisted his body to land feet first. He bent his knees. Then everything went black.

The Doctor surfaced at nearby Wood Wharf. He woke to the warmth of Clara’s flat, Lancastrian vowels: “Just call me awesome.”

“Clara Oswald.” The Doctor smiled, coming round.

“How about that for a spot of lifesaving?”

“You’ll out-Doctor me one of these days.”

“I know, right?” Clara beamed.

“That was a warning, not a compliment.” The Doctor sat up. “Carry on like this, you’ll have a lot of cross, wet bankers on your hands… What’s that doing here?” He pointed to an object that had washed up next to him.

“Don’t know,” said Clara, picking up the guitar. “Must have fallen with you.”

The Doctor furrowed his beetling brow. “Then where’s everything else? If the Alpha can leave debris behind, then where’s the terrible art and executive

desk toys? Why just that?" He seized the guitar and studied it. The pickguard was unmarked. "So, the *autograph* was a projection… Perhaps a touch of artistic flair to make the collection appear real. But the guitar itself…"

"Autograph?"

"Ringo Starr's."

Clara blinked. "Ringo Starr's… guitar? Seriously?"

"Yeah," the Doctor said, "I've already done that."

"Get you. You'll out-Clara me one of these days…"

"Come on!" The Doctor was already sprinting back to the TARDIS.

"Where are we going now?"

"*In extremis*…!" he called over his shoulder. Clara panted behind him.

She had barely crossed the TARDIS threshold when the doors closed behind her. The familiar sound of emphysemic engines filled the chamber. Clara took a step; something squelched beneath her foot. Looking down, she saw it was the Doctor's shirt. Somehow he had already managed to change out of his drenched clothes. Clara headed towards the console. There he stood, in a new coat of burgundy velvet, a monolith looming over the controls. He scarcely moved, save for the occasional glare from beneath his eyebrows – as much to check the monitors, Clara felt, as to remind the ship who was boss.

Clara aimed to thaw the atmosphere: "So, how was the big interview?"

"Fine," the Doctor said. "I think I can see myself in the CEO's chair one day." His fingers moved with ultimate economy. He did not look up.

Well, that conversation dried up quickly. Looking at the monitors, Clara could see they were locked on to the Alpha's trail. "So…" said Clara. "This CEO – is he the bad guy then?"

"No. Charming fella. Well, used to be." The Doctor examined the coordinates. "We had rather a lot in common, as it goes. Two hearts apiece, both of us connoisseurs of stolen TARDISes…"

Clara's eyes widened. "No."

"Yes."

"You mean you met… Wait. Why are you talking about him in the past tense?"

The Doctor sighed. "Because, Clara, he died billions of years away. I watched it happen. I was speaking to a ghost." He turned towards the school teacher. "Clara, I know what we're up against. He told me. I mean, I told myself." He flapped a dismissive arm. "Whatever."

"Okay. Then tell me."

The groan of TARDIS materialization filled the air. Without pausing, the Doctor walked to the external doors. He stepped from the ship. Clara followed him into blackness. The cold struck their faces like the back of someone's hand. The air seemed to crackle when they exhaled. The Doctor cast a little light with his sonic screwdriver, and his breath billowed, translucent in the modest glow.

Clara peered into the eldritch gloom of the space station. She did her best to ignore the images that were starting to build up again in her mind. "We're back," she said. "It's Refuge."

"Ha. Of course," said the Time Lord. "Enough power for one last trip or two… Without a pilot, where else would the Alpha go? This is the only home it has left." He reached out and touched the wall. "A refuge no longer."

He waved the screwdriver about, listening for a change in register. Clara heard it. "That way," she said. The Doctor nodded.

They walked together. The Doctor ran his hand along the corridor. The strange material, once supple to the touch, had calcified and turned brittle. Chunks of it came away under his fingertips, shattering at the travellers' feet like sugar glass. They pressed on.

Clara could not stand the silence. She needed to take her mind off the darkness surrounding them. "Go on then," she said. "Tell me. What are we facing?"

Through the dim glow, Clara watched the Doctor bite his lip. She knew that face. *Figuring out the best way to explain…* "Clara," he said at last, "have you ever lain awake in bed at night, unable to sleep, terrified by what you think you see in the shadows?"

For a moment, a vision of the thing in the corner flashed before Clara's eyes. The darkness seemed to press in around her. "Yeah," she said. "When I was a child. Of course."

"Of course." The Doctor's mouth smiled. His eyes did not. "We all have. We've all woken up in a cold sweat, haven't we? Lying there in the dark. Too scared even to move. Certainly too scared to peek into the corridor outside. Because that corridor… it's never seemed longer, has it? At night. Somehow wilder. Off limits. Just a short walk to the bathroom – and yet there's something unquiet about it, isn't there? Something forbidding. When all the lights are off… Why do you reckon that is, Clara? What makes us shiver and hesitate? Is it because we suppose there's something lurking there, in the dark? What is it that we're afraid we might see crawling towards us from the shadows?" He touched the hairs on the back of his neck. The vapour of his breath swirled in front of him. "You know," he said, "when I was a boy, I used to wake up screaming, convinced that a witch was sitting on my chest."

"You've got witches on Gallifrey?"

"We *invented* witches. The Time Lords exiled them all to Earth – they couldn't get enough of exiling people to Earth back in the day. Shipped them off to a place called Salem, but that's another story." He halted and turned towards her. "Why do babies cry in the dark, Clara?"

Clara thought for a moment. "Well, they're too young to tell fantasy from reality, so images from fairy stories build up until…" The Doctor was already shaking his head. "Fine then, Supernanny. If not that, then what?"

The Doctor looked as though he wished he had a chalkboard. "What shape are stars, Clara?"

"What?"

"What shape are stars?"

"Well… they're pointy."

The Doctor grinned. "Stars are burning spheres of plasma. Gravity pulls everything towards the centre, so they are – as you well know, if you stop to

think about it – round. Yet they do look pointy, don't they? That's because our eyes age, Clara. They develop imperfections. Thousands of microscopic scratches refracting the light. As we grow, we lose the ability to see things for what they truly are. So, why do children cry in the dark, Clara?" He moved in closer. "Because their eyes are still young enough to see the monsters."

Clara felt her mouth go dry. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me… that there *are* monsters in the dark?"

The Doctor started walking again. Clara trotted after him. "There was a tradition in ninth century Arabia," he said. "They believed that when a baby cries, it's because a jinn is squatting by its cradle, poking at it… Funny how folktales travel. When I was growing up, there were stories about a place called 'the Abyss.' Supposedly, a dimension that exists wherever light fails to shine. This Abyss…" He grinned. "They say there's a creature in it. Crouching. Silently. Wherever there is darkness. In the emptiness of space. In the corners of our bedrooms…" He glanced at his companion. "Beneath the lids of our eyes." Clara listened, unblinking. The air around them seemed to grow heavy. "It doesn't *live* in the dark," he continued. "It *is* the Dark. Not without reason do people imbue a black sky overhead with physical properties – 'the cloth of night'… There's something there. Behind the stars. Something that crept into existence in the same breath as the universe itself. A living entity. It's always existed and it always will. Skulking at the limits of our awareness. Feeding on our emotions. Wherever there is darkness. Watching."

"Okay," said Clara. "Officially the freakiest thing you've ever said." She breathed and, for a moment, believed she heard the sound of digestive juices gurgling in the darkness. "Mind you," she said, aiming to affect a carefree tone, not entirely successfully, "I've heard of scarier monsters. I mean, it's not like it actually kills you…"

"Who's to say it doesn't?" the Doctor shot back. "Thousands of sleeps over the course of a human lifetime… A hundred million tiny blinks, letting the darkness in bit by bit… Who's to say it isn't the Dark that gets you in the end?"

Clara tilted her head. "You've got to be kidding."

"Well, it's a theory." The Doctor shrugged. "Anyway, I grew up. I stopped believing in monsters in the corner. Because it's nonsense, isn't it, Clara?" He stopped again. "Oh, but Clara Oswald! What if it isn't nonsense? What if it's real? Because if it is real – if there really *is* a creature hiding in the darkness, leeching off our emotions – then that explains a few things, doesn't it? It explains why we find the things that frighten us… well, frightening. After all, Clara – what is the wellspring of all our deepest, most primal terrors?" His pupils scanned the blackness in front of them. "The unlit cellar. The old, dark house in the dark, old forest. The cobweb-shrouded attic. The country churchyard at night." He grimaced. "All those long shadows behind the gravestones…"

Clara hugged herself involuntarily, remembering the two funerals she had been to. "All right. So, let's say it's true. What's any of that got to do with the Alpha?"

The Doctor pursed his lips. The duo resumed walking, slowly. “Suppose you’re a creature that does nothing. Nothing really. You don’t eat, you don’t make war. You don’t go on holidays to the Costa del Sol. You just *are*. It’s what you do – it’s like your thing. Ever since the dawn of time. You simply exist. Always have done, always will. Except – minor detail – the universe is ending! In fire and brimstone. Actually, more like in ice and… well, ice, but you get the idea. What you need is a TARDIS to take you back to the beginning, so you can start doing nothing all over again. One slight snag – what’s the First Law of Time?”

Clara thought back. “Just do it?” she offered.

The Doctor gritted his teeth. “The First Law of Time is never cross your own timestream. Dangerous at best. Upsets the continuum. Causes some nasty anomalies. And remember, you’re an omnipresent being from the dawn of time, yeah? Whenever you travel back to, you’re kind of bound to bump into yourself. Everywhere. In the same instant. Disruption on a scale like that…”

“You mean like Hitler winning World War Two?”

“No. In this case, more like a nine-headed walrus winning World War Two. Then eating all the other wars. Which are also walruses, by the way.” The Doctor’s eyes darted about the passageway ahead. “It would be an abomination. No TARDIS would allow it. So! That’s that. You resign yourself to dying with the universe. No more ‘doing nothing’ for you! Except you haven’t lived all eternity without seeing a few things. Along the way, you’ve learned there’s a time machine that doesn’t play by the rules. And you hatch a plan. You’ll wait, until the last seconds of the universe, when the final embers of warmth are extinguished and the last lights sputter and die. When there’s no one left to stop you, *then* you’ll steal the Alpha. And you’ll live again.”

“When there’s no one left to stop you,” Clara echoed. Then, for the first time in several minutes, she smiled. “But there *was* someone left…”

“What can I say? I’m good at what I do.” The Doctor gestured coyly. “That’s right, *I* spirited away the Alpha. Or, at least, I will do. And that buys me time. But I’m wounded. Dying. My body unravelling as reality itself unravels. I can’t hide the Alpha forever. I need someone to help me. So I manipulate my own timeline. I lay plans. I set traps. I change my own past to breed the perfect incarnation to defeat the Dark.”

“Which explains the new memories.”

“And our friend in the mask, remember?”

Clara nodded. Her fingers had started to ache with cold. “So what are you supposed to do. I mean, *you* you. This you.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “Well… that’s the question, isn’t it? I think the interview was meant to be the final briefing. Unfortunately, we had something of a communications breakdown. So, Clara Oswald. Tell me – what should I do?”

He looked tired. Clara reached out. She took his hand. He stopped walking. “You’re going to do what you always do,” she said. “Be the man that stops the monsters.” She looked at him. “You’re really going to wander around at the end of the universe with a guitar slung across your back?”

"Why not? I doubt Ringo Starr's still knocking about to want it back. Besides, what's wrong with wandering around at the end of the universe with a guitar? Like you've ever known a thing about fashion."

Clara puffed out a plume of vapour. "Go on then."

"What?"

"Say it. You know you want to. 'Guitars are cool.'"

The Doctor flashed Clara a look, at once mystified and unimpressed. "Why on Earth would I want to say something like that?" They turned a corner. "Oh… Now this is more like it – creepy stuff!"

The companions were in a space filled with statues. Clara's pulse started galloping as she experienced a flashback to a cave on an island in the Mediterranean. There were stone statues resembling angels clawing at her, and… *God, was that really only this morning?*

"Clara! Wait! Don't!"

Clara was moving towards one of the statues. Something told her these were not Angels. As she approached, she thought she detected a hint of colour in the darkness. The statue was red.

"Oh, no…" she said. "Doctor, it's all right." She placed a hand on the ice-bound Squirrel Knight. "The Knights of Refuge. Frozen solid." She looked into the terror-stricken eyes of the anthropomorph in front of her. "Poor thing."

"Not just the Knights." The Doctor's voice called from deeper in the chamber. Clara turned. The Doctor was crouching, examining shards of what had once been a rust-coloured cuirass. He reached among the pieces and scooped up a handful of ash. "Behold!" he intoned with Caledonian theatricality. He let the pulverized remains of the breastplate's former occupant trickle from between his fingers. "The last of the Last! The last idiot to wear mercury-based armour in a universe approaching heat death, anyway. Thermal contraction…" He smirked. "Talk about a snug fit."

"That's horrible," said Clara. She walked towards him, past the hulking corpus of a frozen Kroatoa. "I mean, not that I was his biggest fan…"

"He was a moron," said the Doctor. "Incredible, isn't it? The end of all things – and still you've got morons running about."

"What about the others?" Clara gestured around her. "Is it too late to help?"

The Doctor stood. "Well, they look pretty mummified to me. But I suppose it could be a form of cryonic suspension." He put his hands in his pockets. "It's academic. No heat, no hope. And no point standing around." He dusted his hands on the skirts of his coat. "Come on."

They passed together through that sepulchral place. Metallic flooring gave way to rudimentary stone paving. The companions held hands as they slipped and slid over ice-clad cobblestones. Clara became aware of the shadows deepening further. The darkest patches seemed to wriggle with corporeality. She tried not to notice; it made her think unpleasant things. They pushed onwards, and the night grew increasingly dense. Clara felt it leaning in around her, the darkness howling about her ears as she stumbled on. The small pair staggered blindly through an everlasting nothing.

Eventually, they came to the ravine separating the two aspects of Refuge – the place where the Notiovore had caused one of the Last's foot soldiers to tumble into eternity. On the other side, Clara knew, stood the Alpha, even if she could not see it. The darkness was near total, the edges of the ravine detectable only by the deeper blackness in between. The sensation was indescribable. The only thing Clara could liken it to was the act of staring into a pot of Indian ink – although the ravine's innards were immeasurably darker. As with swirling ink, there was a mass to this blackness and a weight. It seemed to coil around itself in the bottomless void, as if sentient. Unsettling shapes coalesced in the limitless deep – real or imagined, Clara could not be sure, but something told her the shapes had teeth.

The pit lay open before her like a vast grave in the earth. There was no question – she and the Doctor had reached the nexus of the Abyss. The old man took a step towards the brink.

"Good to meet you at last!" he said. "Quite a place you've got here. What do you call the colour scheme? Midnight Mist?" As far as Clara could tell, the Doctor placed his hands on his hips. "You've got some space, that's for sure. Certainly room to swing a cat! Of course, you'd have to *find* a cat first. In this light? I blame your interior designer. All this space, and he's made it impossible for you to find a cat. What's an omnipresent entity got to do to get some half-decent cat-swinging done nowadays? Who's a guy got to terrify, eh?" Clara imagined she felt a tremor rattling up through her body. She realized it was a wave of laughter, as deep and cruel as the night, echoing within her bones.

"Yeah, not my best material," said the Doctor. "I don't do whimsical anymore. Sorry. You're stuck with cross Scottish." His voice coarsened. "I can't let you do it. There's no way. You know this, yeah? You know there's no way I can possibly let you do what you want to do right now." To Clara, it appeared as though the unplumbed depths were knotting together. The Abyss seemed to scowl up at the interlopers. There was something akin to a storm in the air. Clara struggled for breath in the cloying atmosphere. The Doctor carried on: "Because, see, if I let you win, it'll mean the end of everything – everything that ever was. Erased. Rewritten. Made monstrous. All because you want your time again. Well, I'm sorry. It doesn't work like that."

Silence.

The Doctor took another step. "What makes you want to do it all over? I mean, out of curiosity. What was so marvellous about your first go round? Was it the sushi? Silly me! Of course not – you've never been all that interested in good food and drink, have you? Or perhaps it was the outdoor pursuits… That's it – you never got over missing out on that spot on the alpine skiing team at the Salt Lake City Olympics… Wait. No, that can't be right. Because you don't really *do* anything, do you? Let alone ski… Don't tell me, I know! You want to hang out with your old mates one last time! Or is it that girl in tenth grade? The one you never told how you really felt? And the regret's just eaten away at you ever since. Her freckles, her laugh… Or am I thinking of someone else? No – that's right, it can't be you. Because you never loved anything, did you? You just watched it all happen. Silently. From the shadows. All the first dates. All the

holding hands. All the shoulders to cry on. The births. The funerals. A million, million wars. All the anguish and heartache and loneliness and remorse… Sounds like the worst movie ever! A cross between *Bridget Jones* and *Schindler's List*. And you seriously want to watch it all again?"

Silence.

"Here's the thing. You know I'm going to stop you. Anyone else, I'd give them the benefit of the doubt – I don't expect the bad guys to hightail it at the mention of my name. I'm a nobody, see? A mere wandering minstrel, I." He patted the guitar. "But you've seen it all. The whole of everything. From the stirrings of the first elementary particles, to the final, palliative whimperings of this tired, pensioned-off old universe. And in all those days, did you ever see me lose? So don't make this harder for yourself. Acquiesce! Sit back in your seat, finish your popcorn and wait for the credits like everybody else. There's a good little gestalt!"

Silence. Or, rather, not silence. As she listened, Clara almost believed she heard a rumbling – a sound such as that the Earth might make if it tried to remember how to speak.

Another step. The Doctor was at the precipice. "Well, then. Since I'm not going anywhere – and neither are you, obviously – and seeing as we've nothing left but time to fill, let me tell you a story.

"There's this mountain in Cassiopeia. Thirty thousand feet of solid rock. At the top, there's this plant. A droopy, shaggy thing, like an old man's beard. Nothing much to look at. There's not another plant for miles around. See, this shrub, this species… The male and female are separate plants. When one signals to the other, when they're ready to reproduce, the male produces a single flower. Golden and beautiful. The scent floats far and wide. A complex blend of low-molecular-weight compounds. Chemically perfect. Engineered to ensure the survival of the species. It calls the insects to the plants. One of these insects, flying higher than it should, dropped a seed on that mountaintop. And our little plant grew… The years skipped away. Down below, the world *changed*. There were volcanos. And fire. And flood and disease. The other little shrubs – all gone! Just one escaped: the one up on the mountain. Hidden away above the clouds. The last of its kind. Clinging to the mountaintop. No one knew it was there. Probably no one would have cared – a scrubby, prickly thing like that, with nothing to do but sit and wait for a chance to blossom. A chance that would never come.

"So, what happened? Well, time happened. Stars died. Empires came and went. Half the lifetime of the universe rolled by. And, all the while, one little plant clung stubbornly to a mountaintop in Cassiopeia, bathed in perpetual sunshine.

"One day, a volcano in Camelopardalis erupted. It sent a thousand cubic miles of mineral and vegetable matter shooting off into space. And, as it whizzed past the upper reaches of a nearby planet's atmosphere, a particle of something caught the air. A complex blend of low-molecular-weight compounds… And the breeze brought that particle to the top of our mountain in

Cassiopeia. And do you know what happened when our shrub met that air? Can you guess what happened? A golden flower bloomed.

"It was just a flower. It wrote no books, sang no songs, won no wars. One man saw it happen that day. Just the one. One man and a box. No one else. Not even *you* were there. Take away that flower, erase it from ever having happened, and what difference would it make? It was just a flower. It left no perceptible imprint on the universe. Just one inconsequential moment in infinity…

"And I wouldn't see it changed for anything.

"Because, you see, for the first time, after aeons of existence, somewhere in its signalling pathways, a living thing sensed that it was not alone. It might never get to meet Miss Right. But it knows she's out there. Somewhere. I think we're all allowed a glimmer of hope every fifteen billion years or so, don't you? Change everything – like you're about to do – and you change *that moment*. You change countless moments like it. Tiny slices of time that gave comfort to the wretched and the ridiculous and the lonely and the meek and the suffering and the dying and the yearning and the grieving and the surviving. Surely, even a creature like you can understand that!

"And it's not too late!" the Doctor said. "It would be so, so easy just to stop now. We all have an abyss of our own to face. Slip back into yours… Witness the end of reality – you're the only one who can! That's something to say, isn't it? You can't want what you want so badly that you're willing to destroy all of time and space, I know you can't! Why after everything would you want to do that?"

As if in answer to the Doctor's question, the rumbling built to a sudden climax. To Clara's ears, there were words amid the din, coming from many throats but spoken in unison:

DARK… WILL… PREVAIL.

The man from the blue box slapped his thigh. "I knew you were going to say that! That's the trouble with longevity, isn't it? Once you've seen it all, everything gets so predictable. I mean, you must have seen me doing this loads of times: a man with no plan, on the verge of annihilation, facing off against some enemy. Playing for time. Making it up as I go along. Someone does a big old speech… and the Doctor saves the day!" He smiled. "Didn't work on you though, did it? Ah, what the hell! Let's have a song while we wait for the end." The Doctor pulled the guitar around, rummaging in his pocket for the sonic screwdriver. There was a whirring sound. In response, every speaker in Refuge buzzed gently into life. "Trouble is, you may have seen everything that's already occurred… but you haven't seen what I'm about to do right now. And, as it happens, I know the perfect song for the occasion. It's a little number in the key of *Clara-shut-your-eyes*." The Doctor strummed the guitar – a little wonkily, but the chord sang out of unseen amplifiers everywhere. Instantly, there came the growl of mighty engines. Clara felt a blast of heat hit her face. The merest hint of a pinkish-orange glow penetrated her sealed eyelids.

"The thing is" – Clara heard the Doctor's voice cutting through the electric wail – "I wasn't playing for time. I just didn't want to hurt you. I wanted you to see reason. That's always Plan A… But hey, Plan B works! And I suspect *this* Plan B is something you won't be anticipating. Because I sincerely doubt you've ever seen anyone standing on the edge of oblivion with an electric guitar before. See, the Alpha is a product of Gallifreyan engineering. It's as 'Time Lord' as it's possible to get. And you may have forgotten what I'm about to tell you but, from screwdrivers to lipsticks, the Time Lords… could never resist a bit of sonic technology." He played another chord, louder this time. Across the ravine, the Alpha responded to the sound waves. The turret-shaped engines atop the weird cityscape screamed, glowing white with heat. The noise was tumultuous, but Clara could have sworn she heard cries above the commotion – the agonies of a creature of darkness, blinded by the light, dwindling into the Abyss…

Clara stared at the nightlight near the floor by her bed. The concert had still been raging when she and the Doctor had left to drop Clara home again. The Squirrel Knights had been among the first to revive, thawed in the heat of the Alpha's engines. They had proved to be competent musicians, once the Doctor had fetched a couple of old zithers and a drum kit from somewhere in the TARDIS and rigged them to work wirelessly with Refuge's public address system. So long as the music continued, the Alpha would pump out more heat than the Knights of Refuge knew what to do with. The engines' incandescence would keep the Dark at bay. The Alpha's spires had blazed like floodlights at Wembley Stadium. *A rock concert at the end of Time. Pretty cool.* Eventually, hundreds of years hence, the ship would finally run down and the heat death of the universe would resume its course. But, of course, without a functioning Alpha, the Dark would no longer pose a threat.

The Dark… The Doctor had explained that no one could ever destroy it entirely. "How do you kill darkness?" Unsatisfying, thought Clara, to know that, after everything, the Dark would always be out there. Prowling at the edge of human understanding. Watching us. Waiting.

The Doctor had seemed tired on the journey back, almost preoccupied. Clara had thought she knew why. "Doctor," she had said, "you told me you'd spoken with your ghost. I just wanted to say… surely the whole lesson here is that you *can* change events. Within reason. Isn't that exactly what you'll do, billions of years from now? Change your own past? Engineer the perfect *you* to beat the Dark? So, whatever you think you saw happen to him – to you… You know it doesn't have to be that way, yeah?"

"Clara, I'm nothing special," the Doctor had replied. "Besides, for all we know, there may be no 'lesson.' More than likely, our friend in the raven mask wasn't trying to teach anyone anything. For all his interfering with the timelines, perhaps he was just hedging his bets. I might have been a single strategy out of hundreds. Thousands! No grand design. No lesson – just pragmatism. Merely a courier for a planted musical instrument. Nothing more.

"For what it's worth," he had added when Clara turned to go, "it's not so bad, watching yourself die. It's those close to you that you want to keep safe…" She remembered the way he had looked sadly after her as she disembarked.

Clara pulled the duvet up over her shoulder and bunched it around her neck. In her mind, she turned over the pages of the day. Her face flickered in the nightlight's orange glow. She thought about the Dark. Unvanquished. Caged. Forever smiling hungrily in the shadows. *I guess some monsters are like that. The best anyone can do is learn to marshal them and try to carry on.* The Doctor had his new memories to live with, while Clara…

She thought about her mother. She thought about Danny Pink. Then she reached down, found the switch and turned off the nightlight. She went back into the Abyss and closed her eyes to sleep until morning.

Hush-a-bye, Clara-pie,
And tell me what you see there,
For while we sleep, the monsters creep,
And they will always be there.

Illustration by Carolyn Edwards

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And of course, thanks to everyone who purchased *Time Shadows* during the initial year of publication. With your support, we've raised over USD $1,100 for charity to date! We look forward to making further donations through the sale of this *Anniversary Edition*, as well as a second volume of all new stories coming soon.

Matt Grady
November 2017

Framing Story Outline

The following framing story outline was written by Samuel Gibb on April 7, 2015 and sent to invited *Time Shadows* writers.

Alpha and Omega

Part One:
The Twelfth Doctor is summoned to a museum full of ancient and mysterious artefacts from countless worlds. With Clara as a hostage (or at least some kind of leverage), the museum's owner tells the Doctor to locate and deliver to him the legendary Alpha TARDIS – the first time machine the Time Lords constructed. It's wild, dangerous, with fewer limitations – and the Doctor has no choice but to seek it out. The actual adventure he goes on here would be entirely up to the writer, therefore. When he reluctantly returns it to the museum and is reunited with Clara, however, the Alpha TARDIS is stolen by a mysterious figure, and the Doctor collapses, clutching his head, speaking of new or altered memories materializing in his mind.

Part Two:
The Twelfth Doctor and Clara try to track down the Alpha TARDIS. They arrive somewhere in the TARDIS that the Doctor has never been before, drawn there by a mysterious signal/reading. However, as before, a new memory begins to form, and the Doctor realizes he has been there before. Or rather, one of his past selves has been there, but it's also happening right now, simultaneously, because of the Alpha TARDIS's interference. The past Doctor here (one who doesn't feature elsewhere in the anthology) is in mortal peril, and the Doctor must work out a way to save his past self – and therefore his current self – and all others in between.

Part Three:
The Twelfth Doctor and Clara track down the Alpha TARDIS and discover the identity of the person who's been changing his past. It's someone with a history of this sort of thing – who stole a TARDIS and ran away. It's a Future Doctor who has come up against a powerful and seemingly insurmountable enemy that lurks in "the abyss" at the edge of the universe and threatens to consume all life. To test himself and to better prepare himself, the Future Doctor stole the Alpha TARDIS and set his previous selves on new adventures to hone his speed, intellect, character, resilience, etc. The Twelfth Doctor and Clara must take on the abyss, as elements from as many of the previous stories as possible are used, in some way, to inspire or stand together to stop this threat to the entire universe.

Author Interviews

Jolyon Drake (Twitter: @jolyondrake) reviewed *Time Shadows* in *Cosmic Masque* Issue 3. He contributed a story to *Secret Invasion: Tales of Eldritch Horror from the West Country*, a Lovecraft fanthology raising money for Mind – The Mental Health Charity.
www.justgiving.com/fundraising/secretinvasion

Note: the following interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

Dale Smith, author of "A Torch in the Darkness I: The Only Warmth in a Cold Universe"

JD: Why do you think *Doctor Who* and charity anthologies go together so successfully?

DS: *Doctor Who* is perfect for short stories and that's just all there is to it. Somebody cleverer than me said that the TARDIS was a machine for travelling between genres, and it's hard-coded into the genetics of the programme that whatever kind of story you can think of, the Doctor can pop up in. Nothing does that better than short stories: they can breeze in, do their thing and be off again before you've really had a chance to get to know them.

JD: Is it more fun to write the dialogue between the Doctor and Clara when they're alone or as a pair when another character joins them?

DS: That's a difficult one. Capaldi's Doctor is so well done that he can just go off in any direction, and he's a joy to try and capture. Him and Clara together are such a perfect match… but I suppose sometimes they can tip too far into chumminess, and that's when it's good to have somebody else come in and just puncture them a little. But yeah, Capaldi's just amazing to write, even alone in a box.

JD: "The Only Warmth in a Cold Universe" has a range of aliens – where do you start when deciding what they'll look like?

DS: I honestly try my best not to describe anyone. I'm one of those annoying readers who can completely miss an author's crafted descriptions of a character in order to make them fit the picture I have of them in my mind's eye. I read

Cat's Cradle: Witch Mark when it came out in 1992, but it wasn't until one of the characters from it appeared on the cover of *Happy Endings* in 1996 that I realized they were a unicorn.

Some of the best things I've read pick the one surprising thing about a character or a creature and let the reader's mind do the rest of the work. I've always liked the idea of doing that, although that may just be an excuse for not being able to think of a good enough visual.

Simon Blake, author of "Time's Shadow"

JD: "Time's Shadow" goes right back to the start of "An Unearthly Child" – what is the moment of magic for you in those first 25 minutes of the show?

SB: I've always been fascinated by the first episode. That very first iteration of *Doctor Who*: First Doctor, first companions, and then there's the TARDIS itself. Ok, so it's now one of the most strikingly familiar icons of British culture, but at the time this was our first alien world.

However, for me, first watching back in the '80s, there was something equally mysterious about the dark and smog of 1960s London. As Ian's car pulls out of the mists, Barbara remarks "I feel frightened, as if we are about to interfere in something that is best left alone." Damn right! I remember being just as entranced by the junk yard as I was by the gleaming white control room. But for me, the magic moment came when the TARDIS is first thrown into flight. Apart from the excellent wobble-cam-acting from all cast members, we suddenly get to make sense of that tantalizing credit sequence. "Oh, I see! So that's the time vortex, is it?"

I love the fact that *Doctor Who* still retains something of those deserted streets in its DNA. An often dark, enigmatic figure, our hero still travels in a 1960s Police Box, the most incongruous item of that distant junk yard.

JD: You clear up a couple of continuity points for us in this story, whether it be how Susan came to name the TARDIS, or why there's handwritten labels on the console – what do you think it is that makes us enjoy seeing these things tidied up in fiction?

SB: When a programme gets as big as *Doctor Who*, there is a part of it that will always belong to the fans. I think *Doctor Who* actually does incredibly well to maintain continuity over its staggering *half-a-century-plus* history. I remember watching the brilliant Elisabeth Sladen reprising her role as Sarah Jane Smith for "School Reunion" back in 2006. Her performance still carried that same level of charm and pathos – that's 30 years' worth of continuity right there. The reason being that there is a genuine love and consideration that goes into all aspects of this series… and for those moments when, inevitably, continuity fails us, that's when the fans are on hand to patch up the glitches with just as much love and consideration.

One of the fantastic things about modern *Who* is that it is now being written and performed by the super-fans, those who spent so long trying to figure out what might happen if Sutekh the Destroyer ever met the last of the Jagaroth. Steven Moffat even admits to deliberately leaving room in his scripts for the audience to make up their minds and fill in the blanks. It's this investment that ultimately gives us that sense of ownership. It's a sandbox we all get to play in.

JD: What is it about that first TARDIS crew that they can sustain short stories without the need for supporting characters?

SB: I think the first episode is just a superb piece of television – by any standards. It's a solid bit of scripting that would sit just as well on a stage as it does in the corner of your living room. It's not only our first glimpse of these characters, but it's set at a time when this disparate band of travelling companions are still getting to know one another. There is so much to play with here. It's an atmosphere of tense suspicion. Everyone is necessarily guarded, especially the enigmatic Doctor himself.

Although there can be a real sense of delight and charm to the First Doctor, it is only when occasion finds him in a mischievous mood. Equally, there is no escaping the fact that, at the very beginning, the Doctor was something of an anti-hero. He is just as distrusting of his new companions as they are of him. For me, that's the compelling challenge in writing the First Doctor: how to uncover that sense of danger whilst at the same time capturing the character that we know and trust. It was a contradiction that Hartnell always managed to deliver with aplomb.

Roger McCoy, author of "Someone Took the Words Away"

JD: There's so little of the ninth Doctor on screen and in print – what do you think are his defining characteristics for a short story?

RM: He's a very compelling character. While most of the modern Doctors had the weight of the Time War driving their character to some extent, Nine in particular was the one most strongly affected by it. He embraced losing himself in silliness. He had a short fuse. He was moody. He had no trouble calling you an idiot. Just look at the joy he had when he said "Just this once, everybody lives!" And then really think about just how sad it is to have death follow you around to the point that this is a special thing. Just an amazing character, and Eccleston's performance was in my mind the whole time as I was writing it.

JD: When your central plot involves cunning wordplay, how many times did you find yourself reading through the dialogue to be sure it fitted the concept?

RM: It made editing a nightmare, I tell you that. I kept a list of what words the characters had spoken and had to go back and re-check all of the dialogue once I was done. This made editing dialogue in later drafts terrifying since any new word could create a problem if someone said it later, and even removing a word created problems if someone was *prevented* from saying it later.

JD: How did you decide which country would have control of your space station?

RM: I don't know that I seriously considered any nation other than India, though there are definitely many benefits to the choice. Using a US or international station both seemed a little too obvious and created problems for this particular story: the lost vocabulary was shared within the creature's sphere of influence, so having astronauts who were primarily English-speakers would've led to a very quiet story.

I remember when I was younger seeing hints in science fiction about the Indian space program and wondering if they would be the next major space power. Arthur C. Clarke was a major influence in this, and I want to say *2010: Odyssey Two* in particular, ranging from computer scientist Dr. Chandra (the creator of HAL 9000) to Clarke's acknowledgement of using real-life Indian satellites to transmit corrections. Reading about Indian scientists like Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar only strengthened the connection over the years. So, when it came time to assign a nation-state to the station, India jumped to mind

immediately. Having friends who were learning Hindi who could help with the translation didn't hurt either.

JD: Seeing that you write *Star Trek* as well as *Doctor Who*, do you think there is any common ground between the two series?

RM: Incredible amounts of common ground. *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* are both series with flexible formats that allow for an amazing variety of storytelling, both in their primary genres and in assorted sub-genres. They can turn on a dime from hard science fiction to character pieces to romance to comedy to film noir to western, and the results are almost always a blast. Both series have an underlying morality. The episodes aim to help people see that they can be better than they are. Both have endured for over 50 years and well over 700 episodes by swapping out entire casts and reinventing themselves without throwing out their existing continuity, no matter how tangled it may start to become. It can be intimidating to write either because the canons are massive (and I try not to contradict the novels and comics and such if I can at all avoid it), and you have to make sure to put all the toys back how you left them when you're done. But it's great fun.

John Peel, author of "Dying Time"

JD: The Doctor and the Monk seem an irresistible combination – what draws you back to them?

JP: I like that the Monk isn't really a villain. He has no plans to dominate the universe or anything. He's the exact opposite of that wonderful *Spider-Man* quote: "With great power comes great responsibility." The Monk has absolutely no sense of responsibility – for him, great power is an excuse to play. And, of course, the Doctor is all about responsibility, so conflict is inevitable. You can't dislike the Monk, though – even the Doctor is satisfied with just keeping him harmless for a while, probably hoping that one day he will just grow up.

JD: Do you get much feedback from new fans for your novelizations and original books for Virgin and the BBC?

JP: I'm constantly amazed at how many of the younger fans have sought out and bought my books, and how many of them enjoy them. It's a bit odd to have gone

from being a controversial writer (as with *War Of The Daleks*) to being called a "classic writer" by these fans! Not that I'm complaining, mind you.

JD: You've written for a range of Doctors – what are the challenges in picking up a different incarnation?

JP: Keeping the voice of that era of the show true. I can almost write Hartnell in my sleep, but it's obviously more of a struggle with the Eighth Doctor, since there's a lot less of him available. I am aware, of course, of the extensive and popular stories he's done for Big Finish, but I simply don't have the time to listen to them all, sadly.

JD: "Dying Time" ends on something of a cliffhanger – will we ever see where you'd take the Monk next?

JP: Never say never! I'd really like to see the Monk do something semi-heroic. I'm sure it would both scare and surprise him. On his own, without the Doctor? That would be a fun idea.

J.R. Loflin, author of "Visitor from Space!"

JD: Although the War Doctor has such little screen time, there must be a great appeal in writing for a character brought to life by John Hurt. What do you think is at the heart of this Doctor that makes telling his stories different from the others?

JRL: I am reminded of the analogy of characters being like onions that can be peeled back to reveal hidden depths. Writing for the War Doctor is like trying to sneak a peek at the bottom layer or core of an onion. When you strip away the anachronistic clothes, the glib remarks, everything we see as being staple characteristics of our hero, what do we have left? He cares so much about life that, even in the depths of despair that the Time War has forced him to wallow in, he still reaches ever upwards in the hope that he can help and make things better. It may have been the Third Doctor who said it with his dying words, but it is the War Doctor who lives by it the most: "Where there's life, there's hope."

JD: Jed and Roger make an unlikely double act – why do you think children and aliens make the perfect playmates?

JRL: Children and aliens work so well together because the whole world is, essentially, alien to children. They're still encountering things for the first time, and they react more honestly and openly to new experiences without the prejudices that age and "wisdom" bring. From the aliens' perspective, the best way to get to know a new race is to observe the young and find out what aspects of a race's behavior are present from the start.

JD: I may not forgive you for what happens to Lucy in "Visitor from Space!" – how do you sleep at night?

JRL: One of the hardest things for a soft-hearted person like myself to do in the fiction they write is to harm others or have bad things to happen to them. A famous comic writer once said that they could write the best "Daredevil eating a sandwich" story ever, but no one would read it because it's boring and not that much of a story. I try to keep that in mind as I write and attempt to find a balance whenever possible. As far as sleeping goes, I sleep just fine. It's only in my waking hours that I torture myself over what I do to my characters.

Pete Kempshall, author of "Inertia"

JD: Why do you think it is that, even though she clocked up 25 episodes, it feels like we did not see enough of Liz Shaw?

PK: Well 25 episodes sounds like a lot, but if you look at it as the number of stories, it's only four. Even Mel got five, and she had a lot less character to explore than Liz, in my opinion! I also think the character suffers from not having had a proper send off – she's there one minute, gone the next, without any attempt at an explanation. Her story is literally unfinished, and while I'm aware that other writers have come up with tales to fill in that gap, I found myself writing my version of it here. It gelled with the theme of people being stuck in one place and trying to move on.

JD: What do you think is the strength of the dynamic between the Doctor and the Brigadier around this time in the series?

PK: For me, it's the way that the Brigadier is so willing to forgive the Doctor for being such an arse all the time. The Doctor lies to him, cheats him, cons him and insults him to his face, and yet the Brigadier is both pragmatic enough to indulge

him because he's aware that the Doctor is an asset, and savvy enough to see through his façade to the fact that the Doctor isn't railing against him in particular, rather his exile.

That kind of interplay, I think, sets the scene for the UNIT family dynamic later. Despite all his attempts to convince the Brigadier to leave him alone, the Doctor finally realises that he's wanted and needed and, goddammit, loved.

JD: To what extent do you write visualizing the scenes being shot for TV in the 1970s?

PK: Well, it's in the back of my mind, certainly. Before I start writing, I watch all the relevant episodes of the season in which a story is set, and some of the visual impressions definitely come across in the drafts. But I think a lot of the feel for the scenes comes purely from matching to the era you write for. If "Inertia" has plenty of scenes that take place in rooms or buildings that could be realized on TV as single sets, I think that's more a side-effect of trying to replicate an early Pertwee adventure than a conscious decision to replicate a '70s TV vibe.

David N. Smith & Violet Addison, authors of "A Torch in the Darkness II: A Legendary Hero", "A Torch in the Darkness III: Medusa" and "A Torch in the Darkness IV: The End of a Legend"

JD: When you were given the brief for your sections of "A Torch in the Darkness", how intimidating was it?

DNS&VA: It's not intimidating at all! A blank page, no ideas and a deadline can be far more intimidating. When someone gives you the components to work with, it's actually easier, as they act as a springboard and set the whole thing in motion!

JD: These stories must have taken some serious plotting, with a lot of fan-pleasing continuity to fit together – how do you bounce ideas off each other?

DNS&VA: Fortunately, we agree on most things…

We needed two Doctors to meet each other, but which two? Well, given the story is about how we learn and change, it really has to be the first and last. Simple.

Which companion? When we started writing the story, Susan was part of the team, however we quickly changed this to Vicki, as this enabled us to talk about how the Doctor has already begun to change. Often, it's not the writers that make these decisions, it's the story that demands them!

JD: You bring us to modern day Coal Hill School – is it too soon to ask you what you made of recent spin-off series *Class*?

DNS&VA: We watched the first episode and did not return for the second. It felt like a weak copy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It did not feel like *Doctor Who*. (Please note: we love *Buffy*!)

The concept was wrong.

Doctor Who is about letting your imagination run free, in a world where all kinds of crazy characters can bound off into all of time and space to have ridiculous and impossible adventures. Having a series about a bland-but-nice space-prince trapped in a classroom doesn't really appeal in the same way…

JD: Which is more satisfying: writing a multi-Doctor story or bringing back past companions to meet the current TARDIS crew?

DNS&VA: Writing a multi-Doctor cross-over was a wonderfully satisfying experience. It works much better in prose than it does on the TV, because nobody has aged at all!

Whereas, bringing back past companions to find out what happened to them after they left the Doctor would probably work better on the TV screen. The TV series really is missing a trick by not having the odd previous companion show up…

Christopher Olsen, author of "The Storm Eaters"

JD: For many years, my favourite Americans in *Doctor Who* were all in "The Gunfighters", then I developed a soft spot for Grace in the TV

Movie. When do you think the TV show has got an American setting spot on?

CO: For me, "The Impossible Astronaut" / "Day of the Moon" remains the breakthrough success for *Doctor Who* in terms of depicting America. From its portrayal of President Richard Nixon to Apollo 11 landing on the moon, the scale of this season opener was a true game-changer for the programme.

JD: The "celebrity historical" has become a popular approach to *Doctor Who* stories. Do you think the writer has to be careful when introducing the Doctor into established history, not to undermine the achievement of our "celebrity," and what challenges did Franklin throw your way?

CO: At the end of the day, *Doctor Who* is a fictional series. Its writers are allowed an unparalleled amount of artistic license and so any undermining of its "celebrity historical" figures (intentional or otherwise) should be met with a modest amount of resistance. However, a significant quantity of the audience regard figures such as Shakespeare, Churchill or Agatha Christie to be personally important to them, either because they are scholars or students of these particular historical individuals. This is worth bearing in mind for *Doctor Who*'s writers.

One of the most difficult aspects of Franklin's character to write was determining how brave he needed to be. The adversity he faced in the form of the electrical Hive was certainly a terrifying one. Nevertheless, on the advice of my editors, I revised my interpretation of Franklin in the second draft to present him with a more defiant persona.

JD: Your Rose Tyler has a strong and recognizable character - why do you think she has endured as such a popular companion?

CO: Quite apart from the fact that she was the first modern *Doctor Who* companion for my millennial generation, Rose also marked the first time that the programme presented a fully-rounded, three-dimensional character for the role of the Doctor's companion. Hitherto, "assistants" such as Sarah-Jane, Romana and Ace set the blueprint for what was to come with Rose Tyler in 2005.

For the first time in the show's history, the Doctor had a relationship with his companion that was far deeper than a romance. Rose was more than just the Doctor's best friend: she was his soul mate.

Stephen Hatcher, author of "The People in the Wood"

JD: "The People in the Wood" contains some lovely scenes of horror – to what extent do you think it's easier to put horror into 1970s *Who* stories compared to the modern Doctors?

SH: I think there has always been plenty of room for horror in *Doctor Who* - from "The Daleks" onward, it has been a series that has often been at its strongest when dealing with fantastical and horrific concepts. The '60s and early '70s was a time when the very real horror of two World Wars was still very much in living memory. Then there was the daily horror of the knowledge that at any time sirens could sound, announcing imminent nuclear destruction.
On film and TV, the early '70s was the height of the "folk horror" era – movies such as *The Wicker Man* and TV plays such as Nigel Neale's *Beasts* tapped into the concept of horror being much nearer to home than a castle in Transylvania. The British countryside could be a strange, dark and terrifying place. Season 7 of *Doctor Who* in particular tapped into that mood, with stories of horror set not on an alien planet, but right here in England.

Incidentally, I wonder if anyone picked up the reference in "The People in the Wood" to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?

JD: You reference the Missing Adventure *Eye of the Giant* – how important were the original novels of the 1990s for you as a source of new *Who*? Are there any that you would recommend?

SH: I absolutely loved the New Adventures – they quickly became one of my favourite periods in *Doctor Who* history. Unlike many, I really enjoyed the BBC novels that followed too and don't see a lowering of quality. Recommendations? Well, all pretty obvious, I'm afraid - from the New Adventures, Paul Cornell's *Human Nature*; from the Eighth Doctor Adventures, Paul Leonard's *The Turing Test*, from the Past Doctor Adventures, Dale Smith's *Heritage* or Paul Saint's *The Suns of Caresh*. There really are too many excellent books to list them all.

JD: Liz Shaw had the PROBE series with BBV and Lethbridge-Stewart has more recently seen a series of original fiction with Candy Jar Books – what is it about these characters that fans keep wanting more of them, even without the Doctor?

SH: Perhaps less so with Liz Shaw, who wasn't around long enough to make as big an impact as she might, but the Brig is so fondly remembered as a character, and Nick Courtney as a man. There is such an enormous reservoir of affection for both, that when it is done with respect, it is just nice in some way to have them back – and Candy Jar have made a fabulous job of it. The character played by Caroline John in the BBV PROBE series may have been called Liz Shaw, but she didn't seem to have a lot in common with Liz Shaw from *Doctor Who* – and now that Caroline John is no longer with us, they've recast the part. This just feels wrong.

Ian Howden, author of "The Neither"

JD: You've been a fan of the series for some time – how long has the gap for Mike Yates between "Invasion of the Dinosaurs" and "Planet of Spiders" been something you wanted to fill?

IH: The redemption of Mike Yates's character in recent years, especially in the Big Finish audio dramas where he is once again an active member of UNIT, irritates me, quite frankly. Even in AudioGo's *Hornets' Nest* stories, it's mentioned that he first met the Fourth Doctor at a UNIT Christmas party! Now don't get me wrong, Mike's a nice guy on the surface; I feel I can relate to him in terms of his quiet, reserved personality, his slight outsider quality. And I understand that after brainwashing courtesy of a mad computer, his misguided behaviour during Operation Golden Age might be considered forgivable. His UNIT colleagues and friends love and forgive him, so why shouldn't Captain Yates come back as if nothing had happened? Because he did a TERRIBLE THING, that's why; despite his mind being healed by the Metebelis crystal, he decided that it was not only okay to betray his friends and threaten them at gunpoint, but that he was justified in helping those who would retroactively commit genocide by winding back time and erasing the existence of every human up to the present day.

Think about it – Mike Yates was prepared to wipe us all out, because he and his friends thought they had the right to act like second-rate gods and reshape humanity in their image. He didn't have the excuse of a BOSS-addled brain –

after Metebelis crystal therapy, his mind had probably never been clearer; this was something that, deep down, he had always wanted. Would you invite someone like that to pull a Christmas cracker with you at the office party? My point is, Mike got off way too lightly; there were no repercussions for his actions, apart from being pensioned off from UNIT. A few years in the military Glasshouse would have been more than justified, I feel. Phew, glad I finally got that off my chest.

JD: Why do you think we love to see companions having adventures without the Doctor?

IH: I quite like adventures featuring companions getting by without the Doctor's help. For me, it's easier writing for humans rather than a Time Lord, as it's easier getting into their heads, and generally you're not allowed to get into the Doctor's mysterious, unknowable head anyway! He's a force of nature, and undoubtedly fun to write, but give me a flawed human being any day; I can relate to that.

JD: What are your favourite moments for Sarah on screen?

IH: Having watched all of Sarah's stories in order fairly recently, I'd have to say I'm a fan of early Sarah, when she still had a life independent of her adventures with the Doctor; Clara Oswald was hardly a trendsetter in that regard. Sarah Jane Smith – journalist, impulsive risk-taker, prickly as a cactus, keeping her chin up and standing her ground in a chauvinistic world. I'm not saying she lost those qualities when travelling with the Doctor on a full-time basis, but she did get swept away in the fairy-tale aspect to it, allowed herself to regress back into childhood – even dressing like a child towards the end (Andy Pandy dungarees, anyone?). Not having a particularly happy childhood first time around, I suppose no one could blame her.

Abel Diaz, author of "Iron Joe"

JD: What is it about *Doctor Who* that fans will watch it, read it and write it?

AD: It's such a great melting pot of everything you could want in storytelling: it's imaginative, thought provoking, funny, suspenseful, insightful, satirical,

scary and moving. You can do anything and tell any kind of story you want, given the unique conceit of the TARDIS.

JD: What do you think is crucial to getting the relationship between the Doctor and Peri right in print?

AD: To find the sweet spot between the spats they so often had on television, while constantly going beneath that and showing that they do care a great deal about one another, and that their relationship has grown.

JD: Do you have any favourite appearances for Cybermen on screen?

AD: Love "Tomb of the Cybermen". It's got a fantastic sense of atmosphere and the iconic sequence of the Cybermen rising from their cells is among the best directing in *Who*'s entire history.

JD: What was the attraction to putting Cybermen into a historical setting?

AD: Because they seldom seem to get it. The Daleks get to be all over history, but even they never got to do a Western, so I decided to give the silver giants a one up over the pepper pots there.

Nick Walters, author of "The Redemption of Vequazon"

JD: You've written for a range of Doctors now – what are the challenges in writing for a different incarnation?

NW: I don't really feel it a challenge. As I write them, I can hear their voices in my head; it seems to come naturally to me. Must be because I am such a massive *Who* fan that a part of me *is* the Doctor. All of them!

JD: Do you think the return of the series to TV in 2005 has had any influence on the way you write *Doctor Who* stories?

NW: Having not written any *Who* novels since 2003, and then only the occasional short story for charity, not really! But the stories I have written have drawn on the entirety of *Who*, so the new series has expanded the toybox, as it were, and given us four fantastic new Doctors to play with. Soon to be five, I hope!

JD: Peri has some influence in "The Redemption of Vequazon", but you also have a Doctor travelling alone – do you prefer the Doctor with or without a companion?

NW: Depends. With a companion, you have a sounding board, someone to ask questions, someone to challenge the Doctor, so the writing can be sparky and dynamic. With the Doctor alone, you can go a bit deeper into his thoughts, so things become more introspective, darker. So it all depends on the type of story you're writing, I suppose.

David McLain, author of "Indigo"

JD: When you write for the TARDIS crew of the 1960s, to what extent do you want your reader to picture the story in black and white rather than colour?

DM: As the story was all about colour, I sort of figured people could adjust their interior television sets accordingly.

JD: The twist in the tale is very funny – when has *Doctor Who* been at its funniest for you?

DM: Tom Baker was the funniest Doctor, hands down, in part because he had the funniest writer.

R.P. Fox, author of "Close to Home"

JD: "Close to Home" has some of the most alien worldbuilding of the anthology – how do you go about creating an alien society?

RPF: Alien societies are really useful at highlighting aspects of our society. The Metraians are greedy and small-minded in their outlook, which is something we can all experience in everyday life. But the Metraians are a society based almost solely on greed and ignorance, so are they what we would look like if they were our primary drives? That's the kind of question I asked before I began writing them, and their habits and appearance (insectoid, non-human, industrious but selfish with it) needed to correlate with their philosophy. In comparison, the Soltraians are somewhat more dignified (in appearance as well as attitudes), but they still have blind spots such as their blinkered view of those in need. In

certain ways the Metraians and Soltraians are both imperfect – just like humanity – and this is useful for asking questions like could there every be a perfect society?

JD: To what extent do you think writing for the Eighth Doctor releases a writer from having to reference the history of the series?

RPF: Exactly the same as writing for any Doctor would. Because I wanted to write an original story with new characters for the Doctor to meet, there isn't necessarily a need to reference *Who* lore at all. The only major difference here is the Doctor travelling sans companion – but any Doctor could be travelling alone with temporary caveats. Instead of focusing on *Who* history, I tried to focus more on the Doctor's character itself, in which case Eight is a challenge because there's limited "official" Eight to base characteristics on. But this is nothing but enjoyable and in obvious ways makes him a refreshing and dynamic Doctor to write for, and elaborate on, too.

JD: Why do you think *Doctor Who* suits the form of the short story?

RPF: The best short stories, no matter the genre, tend to simply be an idea played out to its natural conclusion. In my view, several of the best classic *Who* stories play out like a crafted, tightly-packed short story – "Black Orchid", "Edge of Destruction" and "The Rescue" in particular (my favorite Hartnell story by far). They are literary. Within them the writer crams mystery, character development, the uncanny and (not essential but important to be well done) a solid conclusion.

Chris Heffernan, author of "Straight on Till Morning"

JD: Season 24 contains several stories involving visits to tourist destinations that have seen better days – why do you think Mel failing to reach a top holiday spot makes for such good storytelling?

CH: I believe Mel is ever the optimist. She believes she and the Doctor can have a nice holiday. No matter how many times these tourist spots turn out to be run-down, destroyed, or outright dangerous, she never loses faith that next time it will be different. Perhaps even more so than some other companions, we really root for Mel to get that safe and fun vacation.

JD: *Doctor Who* crossing over with fictional worlds is always a popular device – why do you think we enjoy mixing our fictional worlds?

CH: That is a very good question, and people have enjoyed these kinds of cross-overs for a long time. In the schoolyard, it was "who would win a fight between Batman and Iron Man," or "could the Enterprise have a chance against a Star Destroyer?" I remember being fascinated when Magnum, P.I. showed up on *Murder She Wrote* and *Simon & Simon*. I don't really know why we enjoy crossing over fictional worlds so much, except to say (as I might have when I was on that schoolyard talking about Batman and Iron Man) it's cool.

Andrew Blair, author of "Confirmation Bias"

JD: When do you think the Cybermen in the TV series were at their most terrifying for you and why?

AB: When I was young, "Earthshock" was my favourite Cyberman story. The androids in "Earthshock" were probably scarier than the Cybermen, but they did have a sense of relentlessness to them, that they were virtually unstoppable. Now, I still really enjoy "Earthshock" but I'm not convinced it wouldn't work equally as well with Ice Warriors or Sontarans in it instead. *Spare Parts* is my favourite story now, but the bit in *The Flood* where humanity bows down before the Cyber Leader is also lodged in my brain. Also from the comics, Kroton the friendly Cyberman was definitely an influence on this story.

JD: "Confirmation Bias" is neatly bookended by the Doctor and Rory – what makes the relationship between this pair so successful?

AB: I think Rory feels like an older brother to the Eleventh Doctor, being a bit more level headed and down to earth in contrast. To be honest, the reason they're in this is because the Sixth Doctor, whom I originally pitched, was already in another Cyberman story in the anthology, and his ending was even more brutal (because it's the Sixth Doctor). So I got the Eleventh Doctor, and Rory came along because he fitted the story better than Amy, and I wanted to limit the number of characters to simplify things a bit. In hindsight, I wish I'd put Amy in there, or made Lennox female, because it's a very man-heavy story as it is. Rory does, though, have this nursing and caring side to him, experience of Cyberships, and is good at telling the Eleventh Doctor off, so he was ideal to have in this story.

JD: Yours is one of the darkest stories in the anthology – come the end, is it unfair to consider it bleak and a defeat for the Doctor, or do you think there is hope to be found?

AB: I don't think it's unfair to consider it a defeat. From the Doctor's point of view, he sees a dying Cyberman with a damaged emotional inhibitor, and euthanizes it. It makes sense to do that; you don't check dying enemy combatants to see if their ideology has shifted while you weren't looking. In this case, though, he's destroying a possible means of salvation for an entire race. So yeah, it's pretty bleak, but there's also that ship full of reconditioned Cyberfolk kicking about the universe. We don't know what happens to them, so there's some hope there.

Stuart Roth, author of "Circular Logic"

JD: When reading these short stories, it's nice to imagine where a cliffhanger ending might fall. For "Circular Logic", are you writing for the fifty-minute episode generation or do you write with a number of episodes in mind?

SR: I definitely think of "Circular Logic" fitting into the half-hour format. It is too short to have a cliffhanger, so I see it as a one-off filler. I like with some of the Hartnell and Troughton series where a story fell through and the producers had to go and write a filler. Some, like "Into the Tardis" and the extra episode on "The Mind Robber" turned out to be neat little anomalies. I generally enjoy the cliffhanger format of four- and six-part episodes. They allow for greater character development and more elaborate plots.

JD: Why do you think there's a temptation to read these stories with the production values of the 1960s in mind?

SR: I suspect that most of the readers are familiar with the original Doctors and the style of their episodes. If so, it would be hard not to read the stories and think of them in those styles. The opposite is also true. I began watching *Who* during the Tom Baker years. Those were the only episodes available on TV here in the US, but the bookstore had a copy of the Pinnacle novelization of "Day of the Daleks". I had never seen the Pertwee Doctor, so in my mind I was still seeing Tom Baker even when they described Pertwee in the narrative.

David Black, author of "Mixed Signals"

JD: What films or books would you recommend to a newcomer to the world of the undead?

DB: Well, I'm no expert either but *Shaun of the Dead* is a great gateway drug. *Night of the Living Dead* is always worth a watch, *28 Days Later* is better than its reputation and *The Walking Dead* comics are superb. The zombies in my story, however, are not the shambling corpses of Romero's films, but rather a mindless mass robbed of their individualism. More like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *The Faculty*.

There was a *Doctor Who* role-playing game called *Time Lord* and the example scenario in it called "The Templar Throne". When a character sat on the throne, they lost their mind; what's more terrifying, they could never get it back. Until fairly recently, I had forgotten where that came from, but that concept really stayed with me. It always frustrated me that in these sorts of narratives, everyone is always so sure that with the removal of the malign influence, everyone will return to normal, and they are usually correct. I decided instead that it would be the malign influence itself that sustained these people, and the only way to end their misery was to end them, too.

JD: It's always nice to see a base under siege – and you give the Doctor less than an hour to solve the zombie apocalypse – why do you think we love this kind of storytelling?

DB: It's true, isn't it? A base under siege is a wonderful thing. There's something very evocative about these structures we build to protect ourselves having the opposite effect. We want to keep danger outside, we fail and trap ourselves inside with it. It's a phrase synonymous with *Doctor Who* to the point that no one ever uses it to describe any other fiction, but it would be a perfectly good description of the *Alien* films and definitely *The Thing*, too. You can see the appeal for the budgetary concerns of episodic television, limiting the number of sets required to make the programme. For the viewer, or the reader, it provides a sense of claustrophobia that really helps the storytelling.

JD: For those of us who have been Big Finish fans for years, there's nothing unusual in a Fifth Doctor and Nyssa story, to the point that it's easy to forget that it didn't really happen on television. What made you opt for this pairing, and why do you think they work so beautifully together?

DB: Famously Peter Davison saved Nyssa because he felt her character worked best with his. Often the relationship between Doctor and companion is one akin to teacher and pupil. You can see it with the Fourth Doctor and Leela, or the Seventh Doctor and Ace, but it's present in many more. The Doctor shows his companions the universe, but with Nyssa it never seems to be about broadening her horizons by exposing her to the extraordinary. Instead their relationship, particularly in the hands of Big Finish, seems to be about revealing the universe to her one emotion at a time. In recent years, Nyssa has gained the depth that it could be argued that she lacked on television.

John Anderson, author of "They Keep Killing Daniel Harley"

JD: At first, the thought of Ace turning up on my daily commute seems a nice way of breaking up the monotony of life – how would you feel if the Doctor turned up on your way to work?

JA: Giving up work and mortgages and council tax to go on adventures would provide an instant rush that would be virtually impossible to turn down, but… upon reflection, as someone who likes to delude myself that I exert a reasonable level of control over my own life and decisions, I don't know whether I could surrender that to be subservient to a time-travelling alien with a database for a brain. It might be fun at first, but knowing and understanding the outrageous power imbalance between us… I'm not so sure. And that's acknowledging the enormous and clear affection the Doctor has for Ace and she for him, and the joy she often has on their adventures.

JD: Why do you think it is that the Doctor and Ace can work effectively on a bus and on a battlefield?

JA: This is an interesting question that I think goes all the way back to 1987 and Andrew Cartmel and his team of writers. They're all clearly massive Alan Moore fans, and his influence over the characters of the Seventh Doctor and Ace is keenly felt. They have a rawness and emotional honesty that was picked up by the New Adventures authors and is still prevalent in the series today. I think

when you create characters who have a clear interiority, you can place them virtually anywhere. The Seventh Doctor in particular is a strange mash-up of the domestic and the cosmic, a man who takes a cup of tea the night before obliterating the home of his oldest enemies. It's a comic book style prevalent in modern media – largely thanks to Alan Moore – and the Seventh Doctor was at the very beginning of the curve of this trend. I still find him the most fascinating of the Doctors.

Kevin Mason, author of "Kingdom of the Blind"

JD: Given the fashion to pop a few missing adventures into the middle of "The Daleks' Master Plan", how long do you think there is between the first and last episodes from the perspective of Sara Kingdom?

KM: My initial thinking, after first listening to "The Daleks' Master Plan" audio soundtracks so many years ago, would have been to say "not very long," that Sara was like a meteor that briefly lit up the night sky of the *Doctor Who* universe, making a shocking entrance, having a series of unrelenting, high-stakes adventures, and then making an equally unforgettable exit. Since then, however, there have been so many interesting stories (particularly those by Simon Guerrier) to feature Sara and explore different aspects of her character and backstory that I now think there's plenty of room in that arc to keep expanding on the character.

JD: Your TARDIS crew seem to have a good understanding of their position and standing as a part of a team, as to who should do what and why – does that make Steven and Sara the ultimate line-up of companions?

KM: I think that Steven and Sara are probably two of the most qualified people to ever travel through time and (especially) space with the Doctor: Sara was an agent of the Space Security Service, and Steven was a combat pilot during a future war in space. These two characters were perfectly suited to be accompanying the Doctor in his desperate race to stay ahead of the Daleks! Both of them seem to live by the NASA creed of "failure is not an option."

JD: The aliens in "Kingdom of the Blind" have an understandable motive for behaving the way they do. Do you think that these days we're more demanding as readers, that we want to understand why people behave badly, or will there always be room for monsters that are just monsters?

KM: There's certainly more dramatic "meat on the bone" when there's a clear motivation for why the antagonist (or any character, for that matter) is behaving in a certain manner, even if it's just from an emotional perspective. For an example, there's no better villain than the one who used to be the hero's best friend!

Having said that, stories are reflections and interpretations of the world around us, and sometimes people in the real world do monstrous, unspeakable things that the rest of us can never understand (and likely wouldn't want to), so I think it's still perfectly valid to have monsters that represent the unknown and unknowable aspects of the world.

Christopher Colley, author of "After the Ball Was Over" and "A Torch in the Darkness V: Nightlight"

JD: Wow. You take on the change in tone between Seasons 17 and 18 head on – how long have you been considering the need for something big to happen in this gap?

CC: Well – at the risk of giving a disappointing answer – it isn't really something I'd been considering for any length of time. The decision to place "After the Ball Was Over" between the two seasons was something of a happy accident. The story's three chapters grew out of two separate story ideas. Originally, I envisaged the first chapter, the Douglas Adams pastiche, as being self-contained.

The second story idea was just this kernel about a post-apocalyptic community. My intention was that the Doctor should find himself able to offer only palliative care. I thought it might be affecting to put Tom Baker's Doctor – arguably the most superhuman of them all – into a position of relative helplessness. The sombre, sober Season 18 seemed a natural fit. But then, I started to think – what if the Doctor's involvement went deeper? What if it had started sometime before? It became a story about consequences. Suddenly my Douglas Adams pastiche became an obvious candidate for a prologue.

It was a fairly swift evolution – certainly the three-part structure, using Romana's diary as a bridge, was set in stone before I pitched the idea to Matt and Sam – but it was more serendipity than grand design.

JD: When I think of comedy in *Doctor Who* writing, I tend to think of the novelization of "The Myth Makers" as one of the funniest stories told – when do you think *Doctor Who* is at its funniest?

CC: Gosh, that's tough. There's a ton of humour in *Doctor Who*. I do feel it's one of the show's strengths – a lot of science fiction can tend towards the po-faced, can't it? The stories Douglas Adams wrote are, of course, a masterclass in comedic writing.

Fundamentally, I think *Doctor Who* is at its funniest when it subverts our expectations. Oftentimes it's something as simple as a sight gag – take the one in "The Seeds of Doom", where the Doctor responds to gun-toting Scorby's order to "turn around" by dourly executing a 360-degree turn.

One of my all-time favourites comes from "The Brain of Morbius". The Doctor, recovering from the effects of Solon's drugged wine, wakes to find the Sisterhood of Karn offering him a restorative beverage. "No, thank you," he demurs groggily. "I had a little drink about an hour ago…" I don't know whether it was Tom Baker or script editor Robert Holmes who decided that a quote from "Show Me the Way to Go Home" would be apposite, but it's bonkers and perfect.

Reflecting on the examples I've chosen, it's fair to say that I feel the Tom Baker years represent the apex of comedy done well in the classic series. In the new, my vote goes to any episode featuring the glorious Michelle Gomez, who manages to make Missy both utterly terrifying and screamingly funny at the same time.

JD: "Nightlight" brings the whole collection to a conclusion and rounds off "A Torch in the Darkness" – there's a lot going on in the story, but what in there are you particularly chuffed with?

CC: Generally, I subscribe to Randall Jarrell's definition of a novel as being "a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it." I think one could reasonably extend that definition to any work of fiction regardless of page count. Had we but world enough and time, I'm sure there's plenty I'd look to revisit in "Nightlight"!

Having said that, there are certainly elements of "Nightlight" I am proud of. I think the climax of the scene at the bank is pretty exciting. I think the central notion and the song that runs throughout are both appropriately creepy. I think I

got the overall tone that I was aiming for about right. And I hope readers feel the story does a good job of being both suitably conclusory and grand in scale without seeming self-consciously “epic.” It was a real honour to be asked to wrap up the anthology, and I hope readers enjoy the end result.

Author Biographies

Violet Addison and **David N. Smith** have had over a dozen short stories published in various anthologies, most recently in *The Adventures of Moriarty* and *The Mammoth Book of Jack the Ripper Stories*. They've also both previously written for Big Finish's *Short Trips* range. www.davenevsmith.co.uk

John Anderson spends his days writing and editing *The Beano* comic in Dundee. He's been a *Doctor Who* fan ever since a Dalek chased Sylvester McCoy up some cellar steps, and is secretly fond of *Time's Crucible*. "They Keep Killing Daniel Harley" is his first *Doctor Who* work.

David Black has written articles, sketches and scripts for *Noiseless Chatter*, *Cult Britannia*, *Behind the Bike Shed*, *Newsrevue* and *Bad Teeth*. In an act of extreme arrogance, he was forced to reinterpret *The Cherry Orchard* and write new Chekhov dialogue. He blogs a blog at www.davewrotethis.blogspot.co.uk and tweets as @davetweetedthis.

Andrew Blair is a writer for *Den of Geek*, and the ex-Godfather of Edinburgh Poetry. He once tried to use "She is a norm, all norms are our enemies" as a punchline in a stand-up set. No one laughed.

Simon Blake is a writer and actor. Winner of the Faber Academy's Quickfic competition and the Mere Literary Festival's Certificate of Merit, his recent script work includes Dickens' "The Signal-Man" (Vault Festival, 2016). Acting credits include children's TV presenter, Professor Pop, and the *Doctor Who* audio adventures. www.SimonBlake.org

Christopher Colley's published work includes two stories in the twice-Eisner-nominated *To End All Wars: The Graphic Anthology of the First World War*. He has also written factual articles for *Your Family History* magazine. Christopher has acted professionally with the Royal Shakespeare Company and in London's West End. He lives in London. www.chriscolley.com

Armed with a Bachelor's in Film from Middlesex University, *Time Shadows* marks **Abel Diaz**'s first published credit. Online, he regularly shares his film passion on the *Screencritique* YouTube channel since 2010. He's currently in development on his own animated series, *Very Strange Things* (www.verystrangethingsanimated.blogspot.com).
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R.P. Fox is a short fiction writer and critic. He has had essays published on the British horror writer Robert Aickman, and film and literature reviews published on *This Is Horror*. Usually at home writing ghost stories, "Close to Home" is his first *Doctor Who* tale. When not writing, he works at two small libraries in Bristol, UK

Stephen Hatcher is co-ordinator of the Whoovers *Doctor Who* group, and organizer of the Whooverville convention. Steve wrote five *Short Trips* stories for Big Finish and has contributed to several fanzines, including *Celestial Toyroom* and *Shockeye's Kitchen* and *Myth Makers*. He is a co-presenter of the popular *Flashing Blade* podcast.

This is **Chris Heffernan**'s fourth published *Doctor Who* short story. His other stories can be found in *Doctor Who: LifeDeath*, and *Myth Makers* #15 & #16. Chris can be seen as an extra in numerous movies and TV shows, and is an avid gamer.

Ian Howden is old enough to remember watching giant maggots and giant spiders on a three-channel TV, but Tom Baker was his formative Doctor. When not cycling through the beautiful if wet Scottish countryside, Ian enjoys writing film and TV scripts, stage plays, short stories and comic strips.

Pete Kempshall is a writer and editor living in Western Australia. His previous *Doctor Who* credits include *Short Trips: Transmissions* and *Short Trips: The History of Christmas*, plus short stories and a novella for Big Finish's *Bernice Summerfield* range and several tales for *Myth Makers*. www.facebook.com/petekempshallwriter/

J.R. Loflin is an insufferable optimist who loves comics, music, and television. His published works include "Running on Empty" for Big Finish's *Doctor Who: Short Trips* anthologies, "Breath of Echoes" for *Myth Makers #16: Pseudoscope*, and various comic shorts for GrayHaven Comics. On Facebook as J.R. Loflin.

Kevin Mason wrote the comic book series *Sleeping Dragons*, which was collected in trade paperback form as *Sleeping Dragons: Becca's Scarecrow*. He has worked on vision systems that have flown on the space shuttle and International Space Station, and is now working with laser sensors used in terrestrial applications.

Roger McCoy lives in Dracut, Massachusetts with his wife and cat, where he programs computers by day and teaches the Bible in Cambodian… well, also largely by day. And he writes stuff sometimes. His story "The Last Refuge" will appear in the *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds 2016* anthology.

David McLain is the author of the novels *The Life of a Thief*, *Dragonbait*, and forthcoming *The Time Traveler's Resort and Museum*, coming this year from Mirror World Publishing. www.davidmclain.weebly.com or on Twitter as @McLaindave.

This *Doctor Who* story is **Christopher Olsen**'s first ever publication. A soon-to-be law graduate of the University of Aberdeen, Christopher has now decided to become a writer, his inspiration having been primarily *Doctor Who*, of which he has been a fan since he was ten years old in 2005.

John Peel is best known for his novelizations of the Dalek stories for the Target Book line. He's also written *Star Trek*, *The Avengers* and *Outer Limits* novels, as well as original series like *Dragonhome* and *Diadem*. www.john-peel.com or on Facebook as JohnPeelAuthor.

Stuart Roth is a science fiction writer living in the northeastern United States. His work has appeared in Firebringer Press's anthology *Somewhere in the Middle of Eternity* (www.stevenhwilson.com/FB/) and on Prometheus Radio Theatre's *Cattail Chronicles* (www.facebook.com/PrometheusRT).

"I saw a man once, standing in a field, staring at the sky. When I went over to talk to him, he said he was **Dale Smith**, and that he was there to scare crows. I called the police, and they took him away. Then the first crow landed." www.dalesmithonline.com

Nick Walters is the author of several *Doctor Who* novels including the *Doctor Who Magazine* award-winning *Reckless Engineering*. He has also written numerous SF and horror short stories. He lives in Bristol with his bike and his cat, his favourite band is The Fall, and his favourite *Doctor Who* is Tom Baker.

Artist Biographies

Simon A. Brett is an artist, writer and designer living in the southwest of the UK. He regularly illustrates for *Starburst*, *Celestial Toyroom* and various creative projects such as *Seasons Of War* for which he was also creative director. www.simonbrett.co.uk

Paul Cowan has over 20 years' experience as a professional artist and 45 as a dedicated and happily obsessed *Doctor Who* fan. He has drawn sketchcards and illustrations for several years, on such properties as *The Hobbit* films, *Doctor Who and the Daleks*, Hammer Horror and *Terminator 2* amongst others. www.paulcowansketchcards.co.uk
www.facebook.com/paulcowansketchcards

Carolyn Edwards is a freelance artist with over 17 years' experience. Her work has featured in trading card sets, book illustration, cover art and fanzines. Her art is in private collections across the world, and she's a regular exhibitor at UK Comic Cons. She's currently a cover artist for Titan Comics. www.facebook.com/SpiritedPortraits
www.etsy.com/uk/shop/SpiritedPortraits

Jon Wesley Huff is a writer, designer and illustrator from Illinois, USA. Although he makes his career in art direction and marketing, he's also working on several short stories and a novel. His original graphic novel, *Eon Quest*, is a homage to '80s toy lines. www.eonquest.com

Michael Leis is a mostly unknown artist, and he likes it that way. He does occasional commissions – he can never resist *Doctor Who* fan art – but mostly follows his creative whims. Some of those whims can be found at www.Dark-Matter42.deviantart.com

Iain Robertson is a professional graphic designer living in Portsmouth, UK. He has produced numerous covers for Telos Publishing, Big Finish, Fantom Films, as well as many charity projects. He can be contacted at vendetta_uk@yahoo.com for business or private commissions.